

EL TRABAJO DURO: MEXICAN IMMIGRANT AND TRANSNATIONAL
DOMESTIC WORKERS NEGOTIATING WORK, IDENTITY, AND THE TEXAS
BORDER

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to examine domestic work—a low paid service industry that has been neglected in the organizational communication literature. It answers the call to focus on and study actual work practices rather than abstract representations of work. Utilizing organizational communication theories as well as intersectionality as my theoretical lenses, I sought to understand how Mexican immigrant and transnational domestic workers construct and negotiate their occupational identity on the Texas-Mexico border. Using ethnography as method, I conducted 13 semi-structured and in-depth interviews of Mexican immigrant and transnational border crossing women employed as current domestic workers. Additionally, I conducted fieldwork at the local downtown city bus station and at several local city bus stops since domestic workers utilize the local bus system as their primary means of transportation. Sixteen additional Mexican immigrant and transnational border crossing domestic workers participated in “on the go” interviews as they traveled to and from work. In total, 29 current domestic workers participated in this study.

Using a grounded theory approach of analysis, two thematic categories were meaningful and representative of the data: domestic workers enact job protection practices and domestic workers find meaning in their occupation as they mediate through particular occupational constraints. Domestic workers construct and negotiate their occupational identity by reshifting the meaning of work to recognize a sense of ownership and pride in the work they accomplish and by being vigilant of their

environment as they seek ways to protect their occupation. They do not detach themselves from the stigmatized work. Rather, they are mindful of their seemingly strained occupational identity and enact new meanings of work that align with their lived experiences of pride, dignity, protection, and vigilance. Even though the challenges and strategies are difficult to navigate and accomplish, their purpose does not waver.

Domestic workers are mindful of a promising future and more importantly they have a tenacious responsibility to their families.

DEDICATION

For my father, Agustin Magallanes Rincón

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NOMENCLATURE

CBP	Customs and Border Patrol
IRCA	Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986
HB1	Non Immigrant visa in the United States

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Organization communication research has traditionally focused on studying the “professional scope of activity” even though there has been an unclear understanding of what Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) call a “deceptively straightforward” use of the term “professional” (p. 147). The invisibility of blue-collar research in organizational communication has also been particularly highlighted with Ashcraft and Allen’s (2003) claim that a substantial amount of organizational communication research still focuses on White-collar workplaces or “professional” workers as “representative or standard” (p. 23). Moreover, they reveal the “center stage is granted to the upwardly mobile white collar worker” (Ashcraft & Allen, 2003, p. 26). At the same time, Ashcraft and Allen (2003) argue that we seldom read research outside the traditional “organizational bounds” (p. 25). Over the past decade, organizational communication scholars have attempted to overcome this myopic view of workers by “seeing” other groups of employees, including low paid service workers in an effort to understand how their lived experiences relate to the material world.

At the same time, underscoring the actual work people “do” by focusing on working bodies and practices rather than abstract representations of work and the organization allows workers to better navigate through their work and life (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). This dissertation adds to the growing number of work studies that aim to broaden the breadth of organization communication research

on work practices by drawing attention to a changing workforce where the variability of domestic work is juxtaposed with issues of immigration, work, and life on the border between two cities that have been historically known as *Los Dos Laredos* (The Two Laredos).

For decades, thousands of women have entered the United States in search of work, and even though large numbers of women migrate from Central America, studies show that most workers are from Mexico (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Mattingly, 1999). According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2012 American Community Survey, the Pew Hispanic Center reported that 11.7 million Mexican immigrants reside in the United States and of that number 46.3 percent are women ("United States Census," 2012). Women who enter the United States from Mexico (undocumented especially but also Mexican residents) are more likely to hold jobs in low paid service industries like homes, factories, farms, restaurants, and hotels. They are also more likely to settle close to or on the U.S.-Mexican border after migration; however, there is also high number of migrants who choose to move northward in order to seek better employment opportunities (Isacson & Meyer, 2013; Mattingly, 1999). According to Orrenius and Zavadny (2008), the border attracts Mexican immigrant women as a place of residence for two reasons: proximity and safety. Women choose to stay close to the U.S-Mexican border in order to remain close to family and because they may not want to deal with the danger and uncertainty that come with an unknown U.S. interior. However, because of the 2005 emergence of drug cartel violence on northern Mexican border cities, individuals who live and work on the U.S.-Mexican may face a different form of

uncertainty. In spite of the violence within Mexico, there seems to be no spillover violence to southern U.S. border cities (Isacson and Meyer, 2013).

The flow of migration into the U.S. and the types of jobs migrant workers can obtain have been affected by economic factors in both Mexico and the U.S. as well as governmental legislation from both the U.S. and Mexico. Both the migrant number from Mexico and the border security in the U.S. tend to rise when Mexico and the U.S. respectively face economic turmoil (Mattingly, 1999). In particular, there are strong pull factors for Mexican immigrants since they are able to continuously gain employment in the U.S. and have the confidence that once they cross the border, “a job will be waiting” (Latapí, Martin, López Castro & Donato, 1998, p. 13). U.S. legislation has been an important factor in determining the types of jobs available to immigrants, especially Mexican immigrant women. Mattingly (1999) argues that the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which limited illegal immigration to the U.S. and criminalized employment of undocumented immigrants, pushed immigrants into “unprotected and poorly paid jobs” (p. 63), many of which involve domestic work.

At the same time, transnational workers and specifically border crossers between Mexico and the U.S. represent a significant number of workers experiencing different occupational conditions. In this case, the border signifies an interesting site as domestic workers manage multiple identities while varying modes of work performance and practices impact their occupational life and beyond. The border represents a diversified sector of domestic workers that engage and approach their occupational lives differently. For example, Romero (2002) argues that domestic workers who work along the border

are prone to earn less than those who are employed in the U.S. interior. At the same time, domestic workers along the border tend to be what Romero (2002) terms “commuter maids” with green cards and undocumented Mexicans living and working in the U.S. while “dodging *la migra*” on a daily basis. The constant presence of security and vulnerability or border patrolling takes on a daily practice of eluding and escaping in an effort to avoid getting caught working in the U.S. without the proper worker documentation or even the worst case scenario of deportation. Even though there seems to be an overall reduction of apprehensions along the U.S.-Mexico border since the mid 2000s, particular south Texas sections of the border have recently experienced increased tension due to an increase of Border Patrol agents and new technology being used for detection (Isacson & Meyer, 2013). The danger of deportation is very much still present. There are also material conditions that complicate their daily migration experience. The issue of traveling long distances by foot or bus and a lack of transportation altogether creates a laborious feat to merely arrive to work on time and arrive back into Mexico before sundown.

Distinctly, the border between Mexico and U.S. generates a vulnerable and insecure job atmosphere. This specific border site is also volatile due to the ongoing violence in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. The Laredo-Nuevo Laredo border is unique in that it has recently drawn much concern and controversy due to the turf war between two drug cartels in Nuevo Laredo, The Zetas and The Gulf (Timoshenkov, 2013). The ongoing fight for territory has resulted in unforeseen violence, a dismal Nuevo Laredo economy, and an increasing number of Nuevo Laredo residents who have attempted to relocate to

Laredo. This group of domestic workers face complex circumstances while another sector of the population comprised of documented and undocumented immigrant domestic workers that work and live on the border attempt to make their way into the U.S. workforce. It is important to note that domestic workers face unique push/pull factors that have generated certain complexities to domestic work. These factors account for much of the difficulty and uncertainty immigrant workers face once they arrive to the U.S. While there have been a multitude of interdisciplinary studies focusing on a wide range of issues of domestic work, there is still much work to be done, especially from a communicative standpoint. Additionally, there is a paucity of research on the domestic work force that faces the challenges outlined above.

Using a communicative lens, this dissertation seeks to understand the lived experiences of Mexican immigrant women domestic workers on the Laredo-Nuevo Laredo border by underscoring their understanding of occupational life. Such an exploration is important because examining the discursive practices of the body can help answer questions about the relationship between work and identity construction. As Trethewey, Scott, & LeGreco (2006) argue, through “organizations we come to understand who we are and who we might become and the body plays an important and gendered role in this process” (p. 123). Many of us go to work to earn a living but at the same time, we find “meaning, belonging, and identity” there as well (Trethewey, Scott, & LeGreco, 2006). Therefore, this dissertation also adds to our understanding of how this growing population is creating and negotiating their identities in this country’s workforce.

The following chapter examines the domestic work literature through an examination of the historical factors of women and domestic work in the U.S., followed by a disregard of domestic work as “real” employment, and finally by focusing on the employer’s home as a work site in relation to the ongoing tension of the employer-employee relationship. I then draw on the identity literature in organizational studies and difference studies and build from previous work in order to develop an understanding of domestic workers’ ongoing process of identity construction. Finally, I place these literatures in conversation with each other in order to answer the ongoing call for the dislocation of the organization of work.

The Constitution of Domestic Work

The following paragraphs discuss how domestic work has been historically represented as women’s work. Domestic work sits on the intersections of class, gender, race, and immigration is perceived as “dirty” work and complex because of the volatile employee-employer relationship.

Domestic Work as Women’s Work

The job duties of domestic work—caring, cooking, and cleaning or “care work” have been historically regarded as women’s work and have attempted to naturalize domestic job tasks to women. Domestic work has been distinguished as a gendered occupation within the division of labor. On the one hand, productive labor is designated as work that is practiced outside the home and paid a wage; it is also recognized as work to produce and distribute goods and services and is mostly accomplished by men. On the other hand, reproductive labor sustains the home. It is work that is practiced in the home

and facilitates productive labor. It is undervalued, unpaid, and dominated by women. Whereas productive labor is performed in the public sphere, reproductive labor is accomplished in the private sphere (Glenn, 2010).

Domestic work has never been treated as “real” employment. Clair’s (1996) study of the colloquialism “a real job,” offers compelling insight into the ideology of what “real” work constitutes. According to Clair (1996), approximately 77 percent of the participants’ narratives suggested that a real job meant, “working for an organization and being paid well for one’s work. As such, the opposite of a real job is not working for an organization” (p. 264). This means that occupational choices outside of this standpoint are disparaged (Clair, 1996, p. 264). Jobs that fall outside of that understanding are deemed less than desirable and unbecoming. Concerned with domestic work not falling into the dominant ideology of a “real job,” Romero (2002) and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) argue that domestic work in the United States has been historically regarded as invisible and is only made visible when it fails to get done. The job tasks of cooking, cleaning, and caring for children have been regarded as ways in which women can naturally express their love for family, thus essentializing domestic work. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) the primary reason why domestic work continues to be hidden and invisible is quite simple: “The cleaning and caring that takes place in private homes is seen as women’s work” (Loc. 59). As paid domestic workers sought these jobs, the private sphere mentality continued. Domestic work continued to be characterized as work that only wives and mothers accomplish, pushing further the perception that domestic work is women’s work. Domestic workers and the invisible work they

accomplish continues to go unnoticed, furthering our understanding that domestic work is not only women's work but it is also classed.

Domestic Work as Classed

Furthermore, Glenn (2010) argues that as early as the nineteenth century, caring labor or care work involved spiritual and bodily labor. Spiritual labor is described as “an expression of superior morality” where the “supervisory and nurturing” characteristics of work were valued and elevated to a higher degree. However, bodily labor—the physical intensive characteristics of work—was denigrated and minimalized (Glenn, 2010, p. 36). These two distinctions regarding care labor are particularly pronounced when one considers them in relation to issues of class. As Glenn (2010) suggests, it is through spiritual and bodily labor that the “lives of privileged women intersected with poor women and women of color, who were members of groups subjected to coercive labor regimes” such as those from less privileged classes, including slaves, indentured slaves, immigrants, and subordinated minorities (p. 36). This suggests that privileged women were concerned with the spiritual aspect of care labor, yet the less privileged classes worked under the constraints of the bodily aspect of care labor, resulting in disparaged work transferred from upper and middle class women to lower class women workers (Flanagan, 2004; Glenn, 2010; Hochschild, 1989).

This characterization is still relevant in today's distribution of the job market. Women who are retained as domestic workers are employed in such jobs because they are in dire need of paid employment (Chang, 1994; Collins, 2000; Mattingly, 1999). Middle and upper class women are able to “maintain their bodies and professional

images,” while the domestic duties are accomplished on the backs of poor women (Trethewey, Scott, & LeGreco, 2006, p. 134). As Flanagan (2004) argues, from the nascent period of the feminist movement, all women were categorized to embody a single class whereby being female, they were oppressed. Even though all women in the U.S. were in fact denied of certain rights, they did not represent a collective body. This initial assumption led to the same rationalization that working mothers were also a single class and similarly oppressed. However, Flanagan (2004) affirms that this logic at best is “vaguely well-intentioned but sloppy thinking” and “at its worst it is brutal and self-serving and shameful thinking (p. 117).” The following is an interesting contrast of the representation of the professional class working mother and the nonprofessional class working mother:

The professional-class working mother—grateful inheritor of Betty Friedan’s realizations about domestic imprisonment and the happiness and autonomy offered by work—is oppressed by guilt about her decision to keep working, by a society that often questions her commitment to and even her love for their children, by the labor-intensive type of parenting currently in vogue, by children’s stalwart habit of falling deeply and unwaveringly in love with the person who provides their physical care, and by her uneasy knowledge that at home mothers are giving their children much more time and personal attention than she is giving hers.

On the other hand, the nonprofessional-class working mother—unhappy inheritor of changes in the American economy that have thrust her unenthusiastically into

the labor market—is oppressed by very different forces. She is oppressed by the fact that her work is oftentimes physically exhausting, ill-paid, and devoid of benefits such as health insurance and paid sick leave. She is oppressed by the fact that it is impossible to put a small child in licensed day care if you make minimum wage, and she is oppressed by the harrowing childcare options that are available on an unlicensed, inexpensive basis. She is oppressed by the fact that she has no safety net: if she falls out of work and her child needs a visit to the doctor and antibiotics, she may not be able to afford those things and will have to treat her sick child with over-the-counter medications, which themselves are far from cheap (Flanagan, 2004, p. 117).

While white feminists urged for the acknowledgement of and access to the private sphere, women of color's focus was on "improving their working conditions and opportunities, as they have been generally confined to secondary labour markets and to positions at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy" (Holvino, 2010, p. 252). As Holvino (2010) affirms, "women of colour have always worked and been seen as workers" (p. 252). Being a housewife and having a husband who supported a woman was considered a luxury that was only afforded to white women (Holvino, 2010). This distinction forces us to come face to face with the vast differences in social class and to make the necessary distinctions between the different forms of oppression each faces.

Race, Immigration, and Globalization of Domestic Work

Not only is domestic work gendered and classed (Acker, 1990; Flanagan, 2004; Holvino, 2010) it is racialized as well. In the 1970's, there was a sharp decline of

African American women employed in domestic work. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007), many African American women left the industry by the opening of public sector jobs that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made possible. African American as well as Mexican American women moved into secretarial, clerical, or other low-paid service industries. At the same time, because immigration patterns “shifted away from Europe toward third-world countries, large numbers of immigrant workers have been imported for domestic service” (Romero, 2002, p. 117). Trethewey, Scott, and LeGreco (2006) maintain that the U.S. and other first world countries have seen a surge of immigrant domestic workers. To a greater extent, “third world women” and immigrants hold these types of jobs today (Glenn, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Romero, 2002; Trethewey, Scott, & LeGreco, 2006). Globalization has not changed the invisibility and disregard for domestic work. In keeping with the hidden aspect of domestic work, people have not placed globalization and domestic work in the same conversation; domestic work is hidden within the conversations constituting globalization. For many, globalization materializes by “shipping containers, overseas factories, and international banking” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007, Loc 64). Furthermore, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) affirms, that this is “the stuff of globalization” that people regard as real, valid, and legitimate work that takes place on the global scene and not in places like the U.S. (Loc 64). This is surprising as immigrant women from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean are predominantly employed as domestic workers in the U.S. today (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007). Women holding these occupations are usually racial minorities and since the U.S.’s inception of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, a large

number of undocumented immigrant women are employed as domestic workers (Chang, 1994; Mattingly, 1999). More specifically, IRCA called for

- Control and deterrence of illegal immigration to the United States
- Legalization of undocumented aliens who had been continuously unlawfully present since 1982
- Legalization of certain agricultural workers
- Sanctions for employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers
- Increased enforcement at U.S. borders (“U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services,” 2014)

Even though IRCA indicated specific provisions to control illegal immigration by potentially punishing employers of undocumented workers and increasing border enforcement, the number undocumented immigrant women domestic workers continued to rise.

Immigrant domestic workers in particular, differ in legal statuses. They usually fall under three general statuses: (1) legal permanent residents, (2) naturalized U.S. citizens, and (3) undocumented. Particularly to U.S. border cities, border crossers enter the country using a Border Crossing Card (BCC)¹ that authorizes entry for a temporary amount of time. The BCC card can also serve as a visa, depending on a person’s B-1/B-2

¹ The Border Crossing Card is issued to citizens of and residents in Mexico. They must meet the same requirements as B-1/B-2 visa holders. They must also demonstrate ties to Mexico that would have them return to their country. The BCC calls for a temporary stay of no more than 30 days in the U.S. Depending on the state issuing the BCC, cardholders can only travel a certain distance known as the border zone. In Texas, BCC holders can travel a border distance of 25 miles into the U.S (“U.S. Visas,” 2014).

visa status.² In border cities like Laredo, Texas, a large amount of domestic workers are considered daily border crossers since they are authorized to enter the U.S. with a BCC for a temporary amount of time but cannot hold employment.

Domestic Work as “Dirty” Work

It is equally relevant to discuss how domestic work as a profession is marked in order to further the argument that domestic work is perceived with much disdain. Example descriptors that are synonymous with domestic work are “dirty work” and “shit work” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Glenn, 2010; Trethewey, Scott, & LeGreco, 2006). Whereas dirty work involves the physical, social, or moral taint associated with job tasks connected to garbage or death, suspect morals, or involving regular contact with people who are stigmatized or have a subservient relationship to others, shit work encompasses the “literal and figurative” meaning of the word shit—the worst possible job tasks that include cleaning bathrooms and dirty diapers. In the past, second-wave feminists sought help from African-American women employed as domestics or from their male counterparts, but today border crossers and immigrant domestic workers perform much of the domestic work (Ehrenreich & Russell-Hochschild, 2002; Flanagan, 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Romero, 2002).

Perceiving domestic work as “dirty” has certain implications. The word “dirty” is used as a racial slur, and as Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) asserts, the word has been

² The United States government requires citizens of foreign countries to obtain a visa in order to enter the country. Visas are divided into two categories, depending on the purpose of entering the U.S. For example, a nonimmigrant visa is required for temporary stay that is either for business (B-1 category) or for tourism, pleasure or visiting (B-2 category). A citizen of a foreign country must also obtain an immigrant visa for permanent residence (“U.S. Visas,” 2014).

“commonly featured in racial epithets directed at Mexicans in the Southwest and at domestic workers just about everywhere” (Loc. 1440). Historian Phyllis Palmer, who has written extensively on the connections between domesticity, dirt, and race among women, argues that although dirt and housework signify inferiority, white middle-class women bypass this inferiority complex by employing other women to do the work. Interestingly, “dirtiness appears always in a constellation of the suspect qualities that, along with sexuality, immorality, laziness, and ignorance, justify social rankings of race, class, and gender (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007, Loc. 1440). This pattern of said characteristics further complicates the perception of paid domestic work as bona fide paid work.

Domestic Work as Complex

Domestics’ job site further complicates the perception of domestic work. The home as a job site is often perceived by employers and at times by employees to be that of leisure activities and not conducive to “work” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Romero, 2002). The relationship between employer and employee in the home is volatile. Men and women who hire domestic workers do not see themselves as “employers” but rather consumers. They are in need of a service that is fulfilled by a worker. However, the idea of having an employee or worker in their home is foreign to them. Therefore, employers continuously express their relationship with a domestic worker as being one of the family, yet in many occasions their actions reveal the opposite (Romero, 2002; Romero, 2011). For example, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) states that domestic workers are asked to eat in a separate area, even though employers consistently remind them they are part of

the family. This creates a tension of employees being pushed to believe they are part of the family unit, yet pulled once the employers' actions reveal they are far apart from the general notion of what a family signifies. From this standpoint, there is a negotiation of meaning of the workplace, as well as issues of identity for domestic workers whose work and life intersect in multiple ways. The link between domestic workers' job duties and employers' second shift (Hochschild, 1989) is recognized as complex, especially when domestic workers are reminded of the "family" environment at the job site. It is important to stress the history of complexity the occupation of domestic work continues to represent because it is through this lens that its intricacies begin to unravel. It is equally important to reflect on notable domestic work research, specifically those that focus on Mexican immigrant women domestic workers, in order to understand the current state of domestic work in the U.S.

Domestic worker research studies have been conducted for decades, concentrating on a myriad of issues that range from the type of work obtained by domestics, the organization of work, worker treatment, the migration flow of domestic worker border crossers to motherhood and guilt (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Mendoza, 2009; Parreñas, 2001; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 2002; Romero, 2011). Sociologists Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) and Mary Romero (2002) became pioneers through their research of domestic workers in this country. Romero's (2002) analysis of Latina domestic workers revealed how race, class, gender, and immigration status influence the type of work they acquire and in turn, impact their pay, long hours, benefits, and the control of their own work. She centers her analysis by

explaining that the intersecting statuses further exploit and marginalize Latina domestic workers as overworked and unfairly treated. Romero (2002) and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) further reveal that the use of formal agencies, employment, and better working conditions are designated to domestic workers who closely identify with a set of prescribed ideal citizen characteristics and an emphasis of ideal attire: professional, white, and speak English. In their research, both Romero (2002) and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) describe the hierarchy of the organization of work through the employee-employer relationship and designate three categories that differentiate the structure of the job and the interactions between the employer and employee. Their work further demonstrates the spaces for resistance and consent from the unequal work conditions that domestics inhabit. These three categories establish the organization of work through a hierarchy of (1) live-in employment, (2) live-out, (3) and job work (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Romero, 2002). The following three categories are essential because we can better understand the structure of the job and even demonstrate how domestic work can provide spaces for both resistance and consent to an unequal work regime.

Live-in Domestic Work. Live-in domestic work is the easiest form of employment yet the hardest work to do (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007). Domestic workers employed as live-in are usually in that present situation due to need and at times complete desperation. According to Romero (2002) and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) domestic workers that fall under this category are immigrant women who have no contacts in the U.S., are single, or have left families in their home countries. In many

cases, the worst working conditions are seen in live-in work because there is a lack of work structure by blurred working hours within a complex and disregarded work site.

Live-out Domestic Work. Domestic workers usually leave live-in work for several reasons: sexual harassment, lack of privacy, low wages, and lack of respect (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997). Through informal networking, domestic workers leave live-in work for live out. They are primarily working for one employer but are able to leave the job site at the end of the work day. However, as in the live-in arrangement, the domestic worker does “two jobs for the price of one” by taking care of children and attending to the daily housekeeping tasks (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007, Loc. 484). In live-out work there is also the freedom of maintaining a social life, yet employees can be working long hours too.

Job Work. Job work gives domestic workers the ability to obtain certain freedoms and autonomy in this work context. Employees are able to sell their services where a flat rate is given for services rendered rather than receiving an hourly rate. At the same time, they can be flexible by creating their own work schedules. Romero (2002) argues that these arrangements offer domestic workers a certain degree of autonomy and through job work domestic workers can avoid most of the interpersonal conflict that live-in and live-out domestics experience. However, in order to work in job work, a domestic worker relies on networking strategies in order to obtain various jobs.

Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila’s (1997) research has also focused on the experiences of undocumented domestic workers. They argue that instead of treating a worker’s legal status as an isolated variable, “it is more illuminating to examine how

unauthorized legal status, together with race, class and gender, changes over time and imposes different constraints in distinct contexts of domestic employment” (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997, p. 123). These statuses, she maintains, are working in conjunction, resulting in a worker’s job arrangement that determines the living conditions, restrictions, and autonomy. This is reminiscent of Romero’s (2002) point that race, class, gender, and immigration statuses simultaneously impact the type of job a domestic worker obtains or even if she is able to gain employment at all in this unequal work regime. Romero points us to these intersecting points that indicate the resulting classification of employment for these women.

Other research studies have focused on domestic workers and motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). Recent attention has been placed on the complexities that arise when mothers leave their children to work in the U.S. Alongside those intricacies comes the conflict that emerges from a mother being separated from her children. The decision to leave the home carries a certain stigma and guilt that transnational mothers endure. Questions of their own sense of motherhood materialize since they are physically separated from their children and cannot provide primary care, but some studies show that mothers who work as domestic workers perceive the job they undertake as part of their construction of motherhood. The moral obligation and responsibility to work is part of being a good mother (Glenn, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997).

At the same time, mothers who work as domestic workers, especially those who work as live-in domestics, face the tension of negotiating their multiple identities of

mothers and workers especially when their job description is closely related to their own motherhood duties at home (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Romero, 2002; Romero, 2011). This problematizes their worker-mother identity since their jobs as domestic caretakers are closely related to their own family life of cleaning, cooking, and mothering. Questions of their roles of mother and worker are interwoven by the structure of domestic work.

Romero (2011) also points us to a critical question that is rarely problematized: Who is caring for the maid's children? In *The Maid's Daughter*, she discusses impact of domestic work on the workers' children by focusing on the cost of paid domestic work from a daughter's perspective. Through Olivia Sanchez's life history, Romero (2011) focuses on issues of identity, resistance, inclusion and simultaneous exclusion, and empowerment. Romero's research has extended our perspective on domestic work in the U.S. and cautions us to closely examine the impact this occupation has on the worker and those closest to her as well.

Extending the Conversation

These research studies have broadened the literature of domestic work in this country, and their contributions have offered insight on workers' experiences, introduced their voices, and most importantly, revealed the structure of the work and the inequalities and exploitation these workers have faced. Even though much of their work drew attention to the complexities that exist within domestic workers' occupational lives, (e.g. the complex employer-employee relationship, care work disregarded as "real" work, the home not considered a premier site for work, and caring for children at work while

others care for the domestic workers' children) it is important to further explore the complexity of domestic work when we consider areas that have been understudied and demand attention.

First, an area that requires further exploration is the issue of class and immigration status. Previous research has concentrated on identity categories of race, ethnicity, gender, and class, but in this research project, Mexican immigrant domestic workers are working for employers who are predominantly Latino. This research project offers a unique contribution since Laredo, Texas is located in the south Texas region of the U.S. where 95.6 percent are Latino ("United States Census," 2013). Much of the previous research on Mexican immigrant domestic workers has focused on employers who are white (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Romero, 2002; Romero, 2011). Research has focused on how the white-Mexican binary creates a complex employee-employer relationship as well as differing daily practices of parenting and food choices and preparation. This research contributes an added dimension to the existing body of knowledge by examining the differences in class and immigration status between employers and employees along the border region where most people identify as Latino or Mexican immigrant.

Second, as previously mentioned, the Laredo-Nuevo Laredo border is unique due to the ongoing violence and vulnerability in Nuevo Laredo (Timoshenkov, 2013). Many Nuevo Laredo residents travel to Laredo on a daily basis. Although transnational workers also known as border crossers, cross the border to work, making up a portion of the Laredo employment sector, little is known about their occupational lives and

experiences in the U.S. while living in Mexico and maintaining ties to the country. The border life and the threshold of liminality can be explored by drawing attention to this population's understanding of work and identity construction in an uncertain environment.

At the same time, previous research has not shown a detailed account of identity construction. The process and implications of ongoing identity construction for low-paid service industries like domestic work have not been distinctly theorized in great detail. Identity studies scholars have been interested in how individuals “craft” themselves and understand their lives. More specifically, much interest has been placed on how individuals make sense of their “complex and often ambiguous and contradictory experiences of work” (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008, p. 12). Identity scholars have also been interested if issues of identity can help us understand organizations and in particular the workers who inhabit these spaces by providing “insight and descriptions that can stimulate and facilitate people's reflections on who they are and what they do” (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008, p. 17). Drawing from identity and difference studies as lenses offer possibilities to better understand the experiences of Mexican immigrant women domestic workers and their occupational lives.

Identity and Work

The identity literature in organizational studies has been extensive; therefore, I will first introduce this body of work with an explanation of identity and then develop an understanding of the ongoing process of identity construction, identity work, and the provide insight for an understanding of occupational identity. Finally, I will discuss how

critical organizational scholars have also been interested in how the intersectionality of categories of identity like gender, race, ethnicity, and class can further our understanding of constructing individuals' experiences and influencing their sense making at work and the implications of their positioning in a complex work environment (Acker, 1990; Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Ashcraft, 2011; Holmer & Trethewey, 2000; Holvino, 2010; Mumby, 2011; West & Fenstermaker, 1995).

Organizational scholars have been particularly interested in managerial, professional, organizational, and occupational identities and how they understand and negotiate issues surrounding the self in varying workplace settings (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). In conversation with poststructuralist scholars, the identity construction process is seen as a "site of struggle over individual and collective meanings" (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 168). From this standpoint, the self isn't in a fixed and predetermined position, but is rather a relational entity with a capacity to construct, negotiate, and recreate through "competing, fragmentary, and contradictory discourses" (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p.168). Interestingly, Webb (2006) affirms that the self is shaped by the interplay of interaction and experience:

The biography of a self is shaped through interaction and experience, and by the experience of being held accountable by others for our interactions. Selfhood is not solely a result of conscious thought or reflection: practical experience, tacit understandings and feelings shape selfhood in ways which cannot be easily articulated (p. 10).

This means that individuals are not essentialized predetermined beings that sit in a set or stagnant position; rather, they socially construct themselves through the interplay that exists between the world that is “out there” and our individual operation within it. It is consequential to comprehend that individuals are influenced or regulated by what Tracy and Trethewey (2005) call “structures of discourse” where they must “negotiate powerful and often oppressive discourses emanating from organizational contexts alike (p. 169). However, even though these powerful discourses can be constraining, our identity is open and ready to challenge such forces. In fact, we simply do not exist in a vacuum; we are relational entities with a capacity to construct our own social reality. The importance of understanding the social construction of identity leads to an equal awareness that identity is in a state of becoming and not in an unchanging position. This means that the process of a state of “becoming” is what is referred to as identity work, and it is here where the possibility of creating and producing varied discourses of the self takes place (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

As Alvesson, Aschraft, and Thomas (2008) argue, identity work “describes the ongoing mental activity that an individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of self that is coherent, distinct and positively valued” (p. 15). Social interaction however, is key because through this process, we begin to raise important sense making questions that aid in our understanding of the self. These questions of “Who am I?” and “Who are we?” help us create a “self-narrative” that is constructed by “cultural resources as well as memories and desires” in order to begin the process of identity construction.

These two questions guide our conversation of what identity is and what it does in people's occupational lives.

Moreover, this ongoing effort to do identity work refers to individuals engaged in “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness,” and in a more general sense, “specific events, encounters, transitions and surprises, as well as more constant strains” are more likely to draw our attention to rigorous identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Through identity work, we have the capacity to socially construct and reconstruct and create and recreate ourselves.

For example, Apcker and Eggly (2004) conducted a study of medical residents whose part of their job was to deliver the morning report to their superiors. During these morning reports, supervisors continuously attempted to reproduce the ideological discourses that were set within the hospital. Moreover, as residents attempted to offer a humanistic aspect of their report (i.e. engaging in dialogue with patient and asking questions), their superiors mocked and continued to reproduce the scientific ideology set in place. However, Apcker and Eggly (2004) argue that medical residents employ front stage/back stage practices as a possible form of resisting the reproduction of the ideological discourse. They suggest that residents delivering the morning report engage in the ideological discourse during the deliveries with their superiors, yet when they engage in patient consultations they were more likely to engage in dialogue with their patients.

The consultation is discursively practiced and seen through a humanistic lens, yet the morning report is ideological reproduced. This study furthers our understanding of how residents are agents and have the ability to resist and navigate an ideological discourse through identity work. Identity work research such as Apcker and Eggly's (2004) study reveals that we are fragmented selves with multiple identities that have the capacity to do identity work that allows us to maneuver through our organizational lives.

Occupational Identity

Even though identity construction has been usually linked within a specific organization, it is important to consider identity outside of the organization. The importance of studying occupational life through "concrete activities" (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 78) and the emphasis Ashcraft (2011) places on "returning to work in *the* workplace" (p. 14) is noteworthy. This proposition suggests a reconsideration of the "traditional meaning of workplace" that builds on the motivation to study work practices "in and across multiple arenas" (p. 15). This answers Barley and Kunda's (2001) call for not only "bringing work back in" but more specifically to acknowledge occupational life through specific work practices rather than simply focusing on the fact that people are moving into boundryless careers, where movement between organizations is becoming common practice. More specifically however, this draws our attention that a fewer amount of workers are "playing out their careers within the confines of an organization" (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 78). As a result, Barley and Kunda (2001) inquire about the changing "objective structure of careers" and work within the organization:

Significant numbers of people have always devised careers against the background of an occupation, an industry, or a subculture. Moreover, the boundaries of a career are partially determined by the sense that individuals make of the flows, sequences, and locations of their work activities. By speaking of boundaryless careers, theorists risk characterizing an important change in employment relations in a way that focuses attention away from a crucial empirical question: When people are no longer able to use a single organization as the backdrop for their career, how do they lend meaning to and set boundaries around their trajectories? Answering this question requires researchers to study work practices, work biographies, and how people interpret both (p. 78).

Here, we understand that our occupational life plays a significant role in who we are in and out of work. Therefore, organizational scholars have also been particularly interested in occupational identity since our self is manifested through our subjectivity and is then tied to our values and beliefs. Research has generally focused on white-collar workplaces and what Ashcraft & Allen (2003) refer to as an overall “Whiteness” towards organizational research. Because organizational research should also focus and reach different groups of workers, it is necessary to consider how occupational identity is constructed beyond white-collar workplaces like the low paid service industry of domestic work. An examination of the distinct perspective that women of color experience is needed. Thus, studying how they construct their occupational identity can prompt us to a better understanding of how this sector of low paid workers experience and execute distinct work practices when facing striking workplace conditions.

The Difference in Difference Studies

The intersections of race, class, and gender have been well documented and mostly accepted in feminist studies and difference studies literature (Acker, 1990; Adib & Guerrier; 2003; Allen, 2005; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Holvino, 2010; Sandoval, 2000; Zinn & Thornton-Dill, 2005). Even though there has been organizational research focusing on the intersections of varying social identity categories it remains an underrepresented area of study (Allen, 2004; Holvino, 2010; Mumby, 2011). This dissertation is an attempt to underscore the intersections of gender, class, race, and immigration status in order to document the importance of this theoretical framework as a lens to better understand Mexican immigrant women domestic workers' occupational lives. However, it is important to take a step back and consider how a "different consciousness" (Holvino, 2010, p. 251) takes form when consideration is given to women of colors' experiences and conditions or what Sandoval calls (2000) "the signs of a lived experience of difference" (p. 46). This distinct consciousness brings to light the experiences of "living in the interstices of complex subordinate positions on dimensions of race, gender and class and create the conditions of possibility for a different standpoint for women of colour" (Holvino, 2010, p. 251). This perspective is referred to as an "in between" frame of mind, and as Holvino (2010) argues, it is "not white, not male, not economically privileged" (p. 251). Collins (1986) succinctly likens this in-between frame as being the "outsider within" (p. 40). However, along with different perspectives, Gloria Anzaldúa (2007) referred to this standpoint as "the borderlands." A new consciousness of the Borderlands means that

Because, I, am mestiza,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.
Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan
simultáneamente (p. 99)

I too find meaning in this “new consciousness” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 99) that speaks to the underlined message of knowledge building that “expresses and validates oppression, while, at the same time, it also documents and encourages resistance and oppression” (Holvino, 2010, p. 252). To live in the borderlands means you simultaneously are on the inside and the outside, a liminal space. The borderlands represent an in-between of cultures, ethnicities, genders, classes, and beyond. This trope signifies a distinct form of knowledge building and theorizing, thereby identifying and understanding one’s identity.

Particular attention has been given to gendered identities (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Holvino, 2010; Zinn & Dill, 2005) but the importance of “exploring the multiplicity and diversity of gendered identities in organizations” is fundamental since it has been recognized that gendered identities are constructed through complex processes and not in isolation (Adib & Guerrier, 2003, p. 413; Collinson, 1988). Much of this complexity can be better understood through the lens of West and Fenstermaker’s (1995) model of “doing difference,” where a consolidation of intersectionality (race, class,

gender) is fundamental to identity performance. Intersectionality indicates the importance to include “perspectives of multiply-marginalized people, especially women of color” (Choo & Ferree, 2010, p. 131). This standpoint differs from the additive approach that called for “multiple independent strands of inequality” or as an aggregation rather than a fusion where an interlocking perspective aids our comprehension of the effects of inequality (Choo & Ferree, 2010, p. 131). This model helps our understanding of how people “do difference” in varied work contexts while considering the worker and the interactions as the unit of analysis (Aschraft, 2006; West & Fenstermaker, 1995).

West and Fenstermaker (1995) state that “doing difference” has certain implications in understanding the relations between the intersecting points of gender, race, and class. Adopting this framework means that one is mindful of the shifting of identities depending on the context. Moreover, even though there is an awareness that “sex category, race category, and class category are potentially omnirelevant to social life, individuals inhabit many different identities, and these may be stressed or muted, depending on the situation” (West & Fenstermaker, 1995, p. 30). More importantly however, is the implication that “depending on how race, gender, and class are accomplished, what looks to be the same activity may have different meanings for those engaged in it” (West & Fenstermaker, 1995, p. 32). This refers to the understanding of paying particular attention to the systems of oppression that take form for different women. The experiences of women of color are in vast contrast than those who are white middle-class women. West and Fenstermaker (1995) take issue, for example, with the

difference over mothering and child-care in women's lives. On the one hand, white middle-class women often saw care labor and domestic work as "constitutive of oppression" since it exemplified the natural and essential expressions of womanhood that placed a barrier between other experiences outside of the home, yet for African American women, this type of work meant an avenue to humanize them and proclaim their identity as women by showing care (p. 32). Of course, there are other categories that produce difference and structure occupational inequality.

Poststructuralist feminism stresses the intersecting points of race, gender, class, and sexuality and brings insight into furthering our understanding of subjectivities as unstable, inessential, and multiple. At the same time, it uncovers the capacity of an alternative space or a negotiation to bring about "other ways of thinking and doing" and at the same time, provide a "reflexive stance" to understanding a researcher's social location along with their experiences (Holvino, 2010, p. 259). This particular conversation of negotiation must be underlined because at times it seems that an individual's identity is in a fixed or essentialized state. As previously stated, this essentialized position can manifest itself through the structures and constraints of discourses that are produced and reproduced in our organizational lives. We see that identity is a political struggle, (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005; Trethewey, 1999) but we are capable beings to create and recreate ourselves through discourse (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). The capacity to construct and negotiate oneself is played out in the identity work that is discursively situated. Accordingly, communication is "inside" of identity studies.

I characterize it in this manner because its focus and concern is how identity works in and around an individual's occupational life.

Transnational feminism has also brought about significant focus to how race, gender, and class are inside of societal relations like sexuality and the nation-state, referring to the impact of colonization and globalization (Holvino, 2010). According to Holvino (2010) there is no separation in the local and the global—the struggles and processes are entwined. Moreover, this perspective stresses that identity categories are “recognized as sites of heterogeneous subject positions and complex and shifting dimensions of individual and collective identity” (Holvino, 2010, p. 260). In their study, Adib and Guerrier (2003) argue that we must consider the diversity of identities not as separate or essential categories but rather interlocking and interconnected categories. Their study centering on identity work in a “dirty work” job site of a hotel reveals that we cannot add difference on to difference. Doing difference takes on the different points of intersection of gender, race, class, and ethnicity where employees, for example, can shift their identities at work. Depending on the context, hotel workers may foreground their gender and underemphasize their ethnicity in order to negotiate and resist forms of oppression. This study reveals how identities are fluid and how workers attempt to foreground or underemphasize aspects of their identity to their occupational advantage (Adib & Guerrier, 2003).

Lastly, transnational feminism focuses on moving away from presenting “the other” as victims without agency (Holvino, 2010; Mohanty, 2003). The significance of studying resistance, survival, and agency, and not only oppression and victimization is

paramount in this standpoint. As Holvino (2010) argues, “intersections of race, gender, and class are embodied in postcolonial subjects; those who have been traditionally silenced and relegated speak back, affirming their own agency and representing themselves beyond the traditional disempowering images of the so-called ‘oppressed’” (p. 261). As such the focus is in how identity is being played out and how work is being done in order for social agents to possibly resist certain hegemonic processes (Trethewey, 1997). At the same time, this standpoint requires us to be reflexive and reexamine what our constructions of ‘the other’ expose and what this says about our own self (Behar, 2003; Holvino, 2010, p. 261).

Drawing from difference studies can further our understanding of how domestic workers’ occupational identities intersect with identity categories like ethnicity, class, gender, and immigration status. By drawing attention to the processes and struggles domestic workers’ identity construction, we can better understand their occupational lives as well as their conceptualization and negotiation between work and life while multiple identity categories are interlocked.

Articulating the Research Question

At this point, I have discussed how domestic work has been historically characterized as women’s work and how it also reveals an invisible and “dirty” connotation to the occupation. At the same time, I have examined the diversity of complexities that the organization and structure of domestic work generates, especially when we pay close attention to the unique circumstances of domestic workers who work and live on the border. In conversation with previous work on identity studies, it is

necessary to consider how domestic workers working and living on the border construct and negotiate their occupational identity when their occupation has been historically associated with stigma and taint. Moreover, workers who are employed in jobs that are viewed as “less than real” have often been instructed to “maintain a clear distinction between work and home life”—dichotomizing a real-fake self or separating their working and “real” identities (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 182).

Considering the aforementioned literature on the dichotomy of the self, we must draw our attention to domestic workers’ occupational identity in relation to other occupational influences that attempt to control, regulate and ultimately appropriate such identities. Such examination may lead us into a conversation of how identity work can help us understand domestic workers’ lived experiences of work and life. A core assumption is that we are social agents with the capacity to engage in identity work that can lead to negotiation and possible resistance. Because we are in a state of becoming, a communicative lens can guide us through this process by focusing on the discursive practices or the “work” being done. Because pressing questions relating to the complexities of domestic work on the border and identity construction and negotiation for domestic workers still remain, further examination is needed. By drawing attention to the differences that shape the intersecting points of gender, class, ethnicity, and immigration status, we are able to better understand how domestic workers “do” identity work on the border. Therefore, this research project seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ1: How do Mexican immigrant women domestic workers construct and negotiate their occupational identity?

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

Care labor research has typically employed interpretive and critical approaches placing importance on the significance of a deep understanding of human activity by having extensive interaction with participants as well as exposing certain imbalances of employer-employee power relations (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Romero, 2002). In keeping with Barley and Kunda (2001) and Ashcraft's (2006) call to "bring work back in" (p. 88) and focus on the "impact of occupational messages and (sub)cultures within and beyond specific organization sites" (p. 111), this dissertation seeks to study domestic workers' gendered experiences of work as well as their work practices in order to further our understanding of the organization of the occupation (Ashcraft, 2006). Because I am interested in how domestic workers construct their occupational identity, it is important to employ an interpretive approach to better understand the human condition by drawing attention to the important notion that multiple perspectives and constructions of domestic work are warranted.

An interpretive approach makes certain epistemological and ontological assumptions that enable insight into the practices of domestic work and the management of identity. First, interpretive approaches take a subjectivist position toward epistemology where knowledge is viewed as emergent and created through interactivity. Particular attention is focused on dynamic knowledge claims that are created through and in relation to the knower and the known. Emergent knowledge is socially

constructed through the interaction and interplay between the knower and the known and by means of observation (Glesne, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). This is critical because through this social construction, multiple ways of knowing are understood and valued. At the same time, an interpretive approach calls for an ontological understanding that reality is not singular. This means that reality is plural, unique, and local (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). This indicates a value of understanding people's experiences and description of phenomena. Accordingly, an interpretive perspective to domestic work and identity research adds to the call of focusing on the actual work practices that workers undertake on an every day basis by applying an approach that seeks to understand the lived experiences and recognizes the importance of multiple points of view.

Over the past three decades much of the research pertaining to domestic workers has materialized by employing qualitative methods. Scholars have been interested in this set of practices, in particular employing in-depth and semi structured interviewing, participant observation, and shadowing as data collection procedures (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Mendoza, 2009; Parreñas, 2001; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 2002). At the same time, drawing on qualitative methods makes sense since domestic workers are usually hesitant and not as forthcoming to formally complete surveys and engage in formal interviews (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Mendoza, 2009; Romero, 2002).

The hesitancy of domestic workers to participate in research is due to different reasons. First, there are real time constraints that impede participating in such research

activities. Domestic workers usually work Monday-Saturday and keep inconsistent work hours since many do not leave the job site until the work is done, regardless of time and pay. Many domestic workers utilize public transportation to and from their place(s) of employment throughout the workday. Once they are done for the day, they either walk to the nearest city bus stop and board until they reach their destination or walk home, depending on the distance. In both situations, they do not have the time to complete surveys and engage in formal interviews since they use that specific time to rest before the second shift begins at home or engage in conversations of the day-to-day activities with other domestic workers. Second, there is also the issue of immigration status. Domestic workers who are undocumented or enter the country legally but do not have the legal documentation to hold employment in the U.S. and may be reluctant to disclose information about themselves, their job, and their families because of their precarious status. They take a variety of precautionary measures in order to protect themselves from loss of employment or even the worst-case scenario of deportation. According to Mendoza (2009), the study of domestic workers is intricate and due to its complexity, “the development of informal relations in these [qualitative] methods allows researchers to gain access into this community that is often hidden and inaccessible to others” (p. 24). This is an important factor because through these informal relations trust is developed and established and access is obtained. It is here too that the utility of key informants and networking is crucial because these connections will provide an entry point and access to potential participants. At the same time, one may be afforded the

opportunity to become familiar with the surrounding environment where much of the fieldwork may take place.

Because this dissertation seeks to comprehend human activity and a deep understanding of domestic workers' work experiences on the border, it calls for the use of qualitative methods where the data collection allows a process and practice of iteration by keeping a close look at the data that is being generated. This form of methods is not only seen through a lens of understanding but also focuses on what Geertz (1973) referred to as a "thick description" of the culture being studied. The meaning of "thick description" however, has been debated since its inception, yet Ponterotto (2006) points to a particular element that accurately describes what this dissertation seeks to accomplish.

"Thick description" of social actions promotes "thick interpretation" of these actions, which lead to "thick meaning" of the findings that resonate with readers. I like to use the metaphor of a tree to explain the interconnection of these three concepts. The "thick description" constitutes the roots of the tree that nourish and feed "thick interpretation," represented by the solid trunk of the tree, which in turn feeds the branches and leaves of the tree, which represent the "thick meaning." It is the branches and leaves that most capture the viewers' attention, as is the case with "thick meaning," which grasps the attention of the reader of the study (p. 543).

By following Ponterotto's (2006) understanding of "thick description" and using the metaphor of a tree to expand our understanding this dissertation seeks to accomplish the

ongoing dance of describing and interpreting social activity. By employing qualitative methods an “insider” point of view is supported through an in-depth look into the participants’ lives. An interpretive approach allows for an appreciation to capture the participants’ experiences of work to its richest potential where an assemblage of generalizable findings cannot.

In this chapter I will describe my method for understanding how domestic workers construct their occupational identity and create meaning of the work that is accomplished. I will first describe in detail my rationale for ethnography. I will also explain how I gained access to this community, followed by a detailed account of the data collection processes I undertook, and finally, I will describe the data analysis procedures that were executed.

Ethnography as Method

In keeping with a qualitative methods approach, this dissertation is ethnographically spirited work. There are numerous definitions that describe what constitutes ethnography to the point that a number of differing interpretations point to what ethnography is not rather than what is (Atkinson, 1992; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Spradley, 1980; Van Mannen, 2011; Wolcott, 2005). In its simplest yet precise terms, ethnography is the “written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)” that is used to “inform human conduct and judgment in innumerable ways by pointing to the choices and restrictions that reside at the very heart of social life” (Van Mannen, 2011, Loc 248 & 260). Van Mannen’s (2011) interpretation extends to one of the central principles of ethnography where researchers capture the lived experiences of their

participants. Through immersion of the culture, we better understand our continued concern towards the “meaning of actions and events” of the people (Spradley, 1980).

Moreover, Miller (2012) makes a number of key points about organizational ethnography that are worthwhile. For example, she argues that an organizational ethnographer interprets an organization’s culture by immersing in organizational life, and more importantly, she argues that the overarching goal of organizational ethnography is to “minimize the distance between the researcher and the culture being investigated” (Miller, 2012, p. 95). Even though this dissertation challenges the conventional perspective of an “organization” for studying it as a container in which communication materializes, it makes sense to draw attention to the importance of what Miller (2012) called a “rich understanding” of the culture that can only come together through personal experience (p. 95). Her assertion of organizational ethnography remains germane to the underpinnings of looking outside and beyond the container or traditional site-bound approaches and “conventional workplace boundaries” that limit other sights of gendered organizing (Ashcraft, 2011, p. 5; Ashcraft, 2006, p. 102).

As other scholars have noted in their previous research, recent ethnography work has taken form in more continual and succinct encounters, yet still connecting with members of domestic communities and subcultures (Atkinson, 1992; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 135). According to Wolcott, (2005) time by itself does not “guarantee the breadth, depth, or accuracy of one’s information,” and because of the level of familiarity of the city and its inner workings, I have nonetheless upheld the tenants of ethnography of engagement and being precisely positioned to

observe and experience what is to be studied. By keeping this mind, this research project seeks to understand how domestic workers' self-narrate their lived experiences and the meaning behind these experiences. As Spradley (1980) asserts, ethnographers are concerned with three underlining facets of the human experience: "what people do, what people know, and the things people make and use" (p. 5). These three foundational dimensions of the human experience are relevant when we focus on the workers who inhabit this occupation juxtaposed with the conditions they may encounter on a daily basis.

In keeping with the spirit of qualitative methods, ethnography is a social practice concerned with the interpreted craft emphasizing the "how" and "why" rather than quantifying "how much" and "how many" (Van Mannen, 2011, Loc 2949). Aligned with Barley and Kunda's (2001) assertion to incorporate methods that provide the breadth and depth of work life and examine work practices, this study attempts to provide a holistic description of domestic workers living and working on the Texas-Mexico border by providing a thick description of the social practices encountered in the field (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Locating Laredo as Site: Selection and Access

In May 2011, I had completed the first year of my doctoral studies and was anticipating my return to the city I have called home since I was three years old: Laredo, Texas. Even though I was only away for four to six weeks at a time, I genuinely missed my borderlands. Laredo, Texas is located in the South Texas region bordering Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico and has an estimated population of 236,000 inhabitants of

which 95.6 percent are Hispanic or Latino (“United States Census,” 2012). Over the years I have been part of hundreds of conversations where the topic of conversation circled around people’s experiences and relationships with the city of Laredo. Some of the topics of conversation include but are not limited to the following: “Laredo is in its own little country,” “I hate Laredo,” “Laredo is different and unique,” “I have a love-hate relationship with Laredo,” “Laredo is like Mexico,” and the ever so popular “There’s nothing to do in Laredo!” But Laredo, Texas is unique in that it is the most populated border city between the United States and Mexico with the highest Hispanic or Latino population, and of its inhabitants, 91.9 percent speak a language (Spanish) other than English at home (“United States Census,” 2012).

On that first week back from graduate school, I had promised my mother I would run errands and have lunch together, and as I drove out of the my subdivision I noticed about 15-20 women walking into the same subdivision I was exiting. I am ashamed to admit I was clueless as to who these women were and why they were walking into a subdivision that no one ever treks by foot unless for the purpose of exercising. I kept traveling to my destination, but I was intrigued. The next morning I drove out of my subdivision again and noticed the same as the day before, but this time I assessed the environment much better than the previous morning. These women were exiting the city bus called *El Metro* in one of the busiest intersections in north Laredo and walking into the subdivision I lived in as well as the subdivision across the street. Most of them carried their handbags along with grocery bags and some women even carried small foldable shopping carts. I would later become aware of the purpose of traveling with

these said items. The women walked into these neighborhoods and went into different homes. These walks range from several city blocks to a mile or sometimes even a longer distance. Five subdivisions in north Laredo are predominantly in demand for employing domestic workers and most are enclosed and/or cover a large sector where the city bus does not travel: Alexander Estates, Plantation, San Isidro, Shiloh, and Winfield Estates. After realizing these women were domestic workers traveling to their job sites, I quickly wondered about their daily travels, the occupational conditions, and most importantly their work experiences.

At this point, I remember thinking about two important things: Why hadn't I noticed this before? My second thought actually answered my first, "Because even though you are from Laredo, you've only been living in and even frequenting 'this side of town' for about three years." "This side of town" meant north Laredo, where it is arguably more affluent than the rest of the city. It is also most recently known to produce a growing number of businesses that range from reputable fashion boutiques to gourmet restaurants and bakeries. Even though I had lived in Laredo for more than 30 years, "this side" was a whole new world than I grew up and lived in for most of my life.

I am from *Las Lomas*—a *barrio* in east Laredo where most are working class Laredoans that stretch the dollar to its fullest extent. My family was no exception to this requisite. The reason I didn't realize what was happening in my backyard is that I grew up on the side of town where you couldn't afford a domestic worker and the likelihood of seeing people walk to and from work was expected and a daily occurrence. In my neighborhood, the probability of running into domestic workers was not because you

employed one but because they were your neighbors. The north side of Laredo was unfamiliar to me and because my economic conditions were now preferable and my zip code changed, I was exposed to a world I had never seen before.

However, this was not easy to grasp; I was clueless about the working women who journey the streets of Laredo for work in the homes of privileged families—families like mine. This realization evoked contrasting feelings of guilt and embarrassment because I was aloof to a division of Laredo’s workforce circulating right outside my home and neighborhood. I returned to graduate school that fall, but I never forgot what I saw that summer and the implications it had on the organization of work practices and experiences for domestic workers working and living in my borderlands. Something in me changed and from that moment I have not seen my hometown in the same light.

As an organizational communication scholar, I became interested in studying the organization of work and more specifically, I wanted to examine how Mexican immigrant women construct their occupational identity when certain occupational conditions are present. Examining Mexican immigrant domestic workers’ job tasks and their overall work experiences moves us to the direction of organizational communication research which Ashcraft (2011) calls the “organization of work and difference” where work actually happens (p. 3). This organizational research approach brings me back to my hometown to embark on a journey of learning and newfound consciousness about occupational life on the border between Texas and Mexico.

Gaining Access. Even though Laredo is my hometown, gaining access to this community of working women was challenging. I began my fieldwork by traveling to

the city's main transit location in downtown Laredo. This was not the only approach to data collection I undertook, but it proved to be the most fruitful. I decided it would be my starting point after informally discussing this research project with several groups of people. As Mendoza (2009) argues, building informal networks in such an invisible and hidden work environment is important and vital to this type of research because trust needs to be built between the researcher and participants.

One key informant made this process a more manageable navigation. I befriended a Mexican immigrant young woman through familial relations many years ago. We were not close friends but maintained a friendly relationship over the course of 10 years. She had been living and working in Laredo for six years and even though she had legal documentation to cross the border, she did not have the necessary documentation to live and work in the U.S. She and her family were friends with numerous domestic workers that crossed the Nuevo Laredo and Laredo border on a daily basis. She informed me about the bus system, put me in contact with two domestic workers, and volunteered to accompany me to Nuevo Laredo in case I needed to hold any interviews across the bridge. The information she provided was pivotal in those early months, yet two months into my fieldwork, she was deported back to Nuevo Laredo after being pulled over by the Border Patrol in Laredo. I learned of her deportation through other extended family members who remained in Laredo, and even though she had been deported, we continued to speak by cellular phone and had several conversations about my contact list and her knowledge about the daily travels of border crossers. She and her family also answered my many calls and text messages when I

needed clarification on a particular Spanish term and even provided a listening ear and lively input as we engaged in numerous intense discussions pertaining to border crossing treatment and broad immigration issues.

Over the course of two months I had dozens of conversations with family, friends, and acquaintances who either employed domestic workers or were friends with many of these women. All of these critical conversations yielded crucial information. This network of people shared stories of whether domestic workers lived in Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, the neighborhoods they mostly worked in, and their mode of travel (whether they lived in Nuevo Laredo or Laredo) to and from work. These conversations solidified what I came to learn through initial observation. The majority of domestic workers utilize the city's bus system—unless they have their own vehicle, carpool with other domestic workers, or are live-in domestic workers. I would come to find that these are exceptions rather than the rule. This network of people helped me understand that participation and entry would be an unmistakable challenge.

Participant Observation

It is important to take into consideration the most appropriate approach to data collection in line with the population being studied. Because domestic workers are usually mobile workers where they walk and/or ride the bus to arrive to work and are essentially in constant movement, I realized that participant observation and interviewing would function as the principal data collection procedures. In order to help me answer my research question of the construction of domestic workers' occupational

identity and learn about this community, I chose participant observation as a data collection approach.

I used participant observation as a data collection method in order to bring about a richer and deeper understanding of the culture, surroundings, and the people. This particular immersion allows researchers to have first-hand knowledge of and experience the culture. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) describe participant observation as the “craft of experiencing and recording events in social settings” where careful consideration is given to specific practices and involvement (p. 135). At the same time, by utilizing this data collection method I am keenly aware that the underlined purpose is to have an “intimate curiosity” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 135). Because it was important I engaged in as many actual practices and activities that domestic workers undertook, I decided that participant-as-observer would be the best approach to participant observation. I wanted to be an “active” participant observer, even though I was aware of the limitations I faced, especially the high probability of not being able to participate at their job sites or even becoming a domestic worker myself (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 144). This specific “role,” as Gold’s participation typology makes clear, is to engage with site members but be open about research motives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). As I met members of the community, I made them aware of who I was as well as my research intentions. I described my research project in detail and made them aware I was also a faculty member at the local university. It was important to carry my photo identification cards from my job at the university and my student identification every day. From the first day I engaged in conversations with domestic workers, many of the women would

ask about my job, what classes I taught, and two even asked if their relatives were my students. They asked to see my identification cards on many occasions, and on the days I wore a t-shirt with the university's logo, many of them stared for a period of time and asked questions about my Ph.D. program as well as my job. As time went by, many were genuinely interested, but I realize now that during those early days, they wanted to feel somewhat safe and the identification cards helped that process. But there is always an ongoing negotiation that takes form between the researcher and members of the community. Participants-as-observers have more freedom to make mistakes, ask questions, and act like "naïve visitors" depending on the researcher's status within the community. Members of the community are also aware of the participant-as-observer's position and research intentions; this can "deepen and maintain legitimacy" during this process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 146). More importantly, the researcher's status alongside members of the community shapes participation.

Spradley (1980) suggests that a participant observer serves a dual purpose of engaging in activities to a social situation as well as observe "the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation" (p. 54). While keeping this in mind, as a participant observer it was important to immerse myself in as many activities that domestic workers endeavored in order to accomplish their job duties. Even though I was not able to be at any domestic workers' actual job sites while they were working, I rode the city bus alongside many of the women that use the transit system as the source of transportation to and from the job site. I also walked from the downtown bus station to the main bridge between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo where many of them walked through in order to get

home after a long workday. For a short period of time, I also walked through the neighborhoods with several domestic workers after exiting a bus in the mornings on their way to work. Additionally, I traveled to two different bus stops and sat and stood by the benches where many domestic workers waited for their bus route back to the downtown main bus station or for other means of transportation from family or friends. Because I did not join them at work, it was important to be part of their daily travel routine that is an equally critical aspect to their occupation.

The participant-as-observer role is not easy to navigate. Even though the participant observer will be engaged and immersed with the people and the environment, a level of awareness and examination of the culture should also be reflected on and be given serious consideration. As Spradley (1980) suggests, an explicit awareness of the scene is needed and an approach to the social life with a much broader wide-angle lens should be kept in mind in order to pay attention to things that normally would not stand out to the average observer. Here, a level of awareness increases where striking attention is paid to things that are usually “tuned out” (p. 56). Spradley (1980) reminds us of the importance of experiencing social situations by “being both insider and outsider simultaneously” (p. 57). This reminder places the participant observer at the scene where he/she is experiencing social life as an insider—where our experiences “take on meaning and coherence” (Spradley, 1980, p. 56). However, it is equally as important to consider the outsider’s experience where the researcher is part of the scene but outside of it. The importance of maintaining an insider’s perspective is key, but detachment from the scene also offers a unique standpoint of the social situations taking place. The dual role of

participant and observer becomes difficult to navigate yet the significance of being introspective is fundamental and even allows the researcher a level of awareness that is key for this research. Here, it is important for the researcher to “learn to use yourself as a research instrument” where reflection is used as a process of learning and understanding a culture and its rules and activities that come with it (Spradley, 1980, p. 57). The notion of the researcher as the instrument is key in the data collection process and has a substantial scope because it is here we maintain a keen awareness of our subjectivity and position. At the same time, it is equally necessary to continually assess the relationships formed with community members and be able to negotiate the level of participation; this can be attained by maintaining a high level of reciprocity. Because I understood the importance of engagement and participation, I began my role as participant-as-observer in Laredo’s main bus station that is used as one of the central access points of domestic workers’ working lives.

The city’s main transit location is about half a mile from one of four international bridges between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, the Gateway to the Americas International Bridge. I decided to drive to the bus station and walk around the area to re-familiarize myself with downtown Laredo. I arrived at the bus station at 7 a.m. and I quickly realized it is the main entry point to this community since hundreds of women arrived to the bus station and boarded the city bus or as Laredoans’ colloquial expression for it, *el bos* until about 10 a.m. The bus station does not sit on an extensive space. The area is what in Spanish is known as *una manzana*—a squared piece of land measuring about one city block along each side. It has the feel of a Greyhound bus station only there isn’t

indoor access, except for a fast food restaurant that sits inside the frontage area of the bus station. This restaurant has a walk-up window conveniently located outside the three routes usually taken by the domestic workers. A large part of the passengers arrive to the bus station and order a breakfast taco or sandwich, soda, or coffee while they wait for their bus route. The majority of domestic workers use *el bus* as their primary form of transportation to and from work. That same night, I went online and studied Laredo's bus routes. The city's website provided useful information concerning the bus routes, times of departure and arrival, travel rates, transfer rates, and even a link to real time bus information that can be accessed by cellular phone or tablet.

For the next four months, I arrived by car to the same bus station during different times of the day but usually between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. I usually made my way to the bus station three to four days of the week: Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays, and some Saturdays. I conveniently chose those days because I worked long hours on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. I arrived in the morning on each day and parked my vehicle about one or two blocks away from the bus station, depending on the availability of parking spaces throughout the downtown area. I walked to the bus station from my parking space and boarded the bus along with the domestic workers. There were times I sat by one of the outside benches for about an hour and observed the morning activities first and then boarded one of the buses that domestic workers frequented. In total, I spent two to four hours a day in the downtown area, the main bus station, and traveling through different bus routes throughout the city. I spent two weeks familiarizing myself with the area and engaged in small talk almost on a daily basis. The people in the downtown area and

those who boarded the buses were mostly working people traveling to and from work throughout the city of Laredo. There was also a large student population that arrived to the bus station and boarded Route 16 that would take them straight to Laredo's university: Texas A&M International University. There was also a large community of retired people who socialize in Jarvis Plaza, which sits right in front of the main bus station. The people usually spoke about the hot weather, traffic, and even spent some time discussing the news surrounding the Laredo area. I chose this data collection method first because I wanted to get a sense of their travel activities, and it was important to start this journey by building a rapport with this community. Moreover, since I hardly had a relationship with any domestic worker at this point, I understood this was the best method to begin making sense of the daily environment experienced by most domestic workers. All of these exchanges were important because they began to recognize me. However, I learned that most of them were not only guarded with the connections they make, but the information they disclose as well. I introduced myself as a student and a teacher. It was important I was upfront about who I was from the beginning because as I observed, many of the women spoke to each other and if I had not be forthright from the outset, the probability of others speaking to me was highly unlikely.

For two weeks at a time, I traveled the same bus route and then switched to a different one. Even though Laredo's transit system operates 22 routes throughout the city, three specific bus routes interested me because they would cover the five subdivisions that usually employ domestic workers: Route 12A: Del Mar Express, Route

12B: Shiloh Express, and Route 16: TAMIU. Once I arrived to the bus station, I looked for the bus route and formed a line. The three bus routes that a majority of domestic workers utilize are formed on the street outside the bus station rather than the entryway inside the bus station. Because there are 22 routes altogether, I assumed that the routes with the heaviest circulation needed the extra room for passengers to form long lines and that was the reason those specific buses were situated in that location and were separated from the other city buses.

During the second week of my fieldwork, I arrived to the bus station around 8 a.m. and as I approached Route 12B, I noticed a long line started to form. Most of the people in line were women. There were also a couple of men who seemed to be headed to work. I stood towards the back of the line but several women and men kept forming behind me. There was an older woman standing behind me. I had seen this woman several times, and I even knew the area she would exit to head to work in north Laredo. We smiled at one another and I made a comment about how hot it was even though it was so early in the morning. The bus was quickly filling up and as we approached the front of the line, I knew I probably had to wait until the next bus to arrive because at the time I reached the front of the line there was only standing room available. The bus driver yelled out and said he had space for one more, and as I approached the bus, I realized that even though it was important for me to get on that bus to make progress in my fieldwork, it was more important for the woman standing behind me to hop on that bus and arrive to work on time. I quickly turned around and asked if she'd like to board the bus instead of me, but she hesitated for a second and said, "Don't you need to get to

work too?” I told her I had time and that she should take my place. I moved out of her way and she quickly boarded the bus. She would later decline to be interviewed for this research project. Even though the next bus arrived about 30 minutes later, time is especially valuable to domestic workers because of the tight schedule they must maintain with employers.

At the same time, many women must arrive back to their homes to pick up their children from school at a certain time and the later in the afternoon they finish their work, the hotter it is outside to walk to the bus station, the bridge, and sometimes all the way to their homes. These are all daily occupational conditions that must be taken into account when they are in jeopardy of “missing the bus.” During my time at the downtown bus station, university students as well as other passengers (who I never knew their purpose for riding the bus) would do the same as I did that busy morning. In many ways, most passengers and bus personnel were aware of the time constraints these women face on a daily basis. In those first weeks of riding the bus, I gave up my seat on multiple occasions, and many women questioned my suggestion of taking my seat. Each took me up on the offer, but at the same time, they were quizzical and seemed uncertain about my actions. On many instances, bus drivers waited until every domestic worker walking towards the bus stop boarded the bus, even if they were initially far away from the bus stop. Other times, bus drivers would even play practical jokes with them. One afternoon in particular, I was riding on Route 12B and the bus driver stopped at a busy bus stop and six women boarded. One of the domestic workers advised the bus driver that her friend was not far behind and asked if he could wait. He didn’t answer but still

waited. I looked outside one of the large bus windows and saw an older woman from a distance—she was running as fast as she could while carrying a small folding shopping cart. As she got about half a block from the bus, the driver began to speed up, as if he was purposely leaving her behind. However, about a second later he stopped and waited. I noticed she stopped running and began laughing. Everyone in the bus also laughed. I wasn't sure what to think of this practical joke. On the one hand, I was unsure of the safety issues that arose as the bus driver sped up and then quickly come to a stop. However, no one seemed to have a problem with it, especially the woman who boarded the bus. As she sat on a seat inside the bus she commented to her friend, "I thought he was going to leave me behind, but you know how he is!" They both laughed and shifted conversations.

During the first two weeks I would meet two bus drivers that served as key informants and offered plentiful information pertaining to the particular routes to ride, the best times to ride alongside domestic workers and most importantly, they each had a collection of stories about what they had experienced or overheard with many of these women. On several occasions I followed the domestic workers as they exited a popular stop and walked alongside, but I realized two things: no one spoke or walked with me and they each traveled to different homes and quickly disappeared before I could get a word in.

In the afternoons, I traveled to two of the most popular bus stops between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. and waited for the workers to walk back to the bus stop from their job site(s). There were three different methods of arrival to the different bus stops. On two

occasions, I walked from my home to two different bus stops that were closest to my home (Routes 12B and 16). It was important that I made an attempt to trek the same roads and neighborhoods as the working community I was getting to know did on a daily basis. Not only were the temperatures above 100° Fahrenheit most afternoons, these were also long winding roads where you were able to catch a glimpse of shade by walking under several large trees. Many women walked with umbrellas in order to alleviate some the heat. Most of the time however, after I finished my job duties at the university, I walked to the bus stop at the university (Route 16) and boarded the bus. Oftentimes I arrived to one of the main bus stops and sat on the bench until more workers arrived. After engaging in several conversations, I boarded the bus and traveled to the downtown bus station. I either exited and walked to the border alongside several domestic workers and then walked back to the bus station and boarded Route 16 again to take me to the university, but other times, I remained on the bus and traveled back to the university to get my vehicle and then drove home.

On one occasion however, I traveled from the university to one of the most popular bus stops on Route 16 and remained there for about 90 minutes. I boarded the bus again and arrived at the main bus station where I walked towards the border with three domestic workers. It was a hot September afternoon where the sun was substantially hot and glaring. I was extremely tired and the heat was wearing me down. I arrived back to the bus station but had to wait about 25-30 additional minutes for my route to arrive to take me to the university (where I had parked my car). I made the decision to call my sister and have her pick me up at the bus station in her car rather than

wait for the bus to arrive. This was a difficult decision because my intention was to travel in same conditions as my research participants in order to get an idea of their daily work experiences. I made this choice because I could no longer continue managing the heat. As I made that decision, I was reminded of my social class and privilege. The fact that I made a call for someone to pick me up within minutes made me profoundly aware of my positionality.

At first, I didn't speak to any domestic worker because I initially wanted them to just recognize me (something that several participants remembered when I did approach them). I eventually engaged in conversations with numerous of them, yet the majority kindly refused to speak to me and at times ignored me as I was explaining my research intentions. This was difficult, but I definitely understood their initial disregard towards me. After two weeks of traveling to the different bus stops during the afternoons, two domestic workers engaged in a conversation with me about their occupation.

On that afternoon, I arrived to one of the bus stops on Route 16. This bus stop is one of the most popular stops that domestic workers utilize since the route falls in line with three of the most prominent neighborhoods in Laredo: Alexander Estates, Winfield Estates, and Plantation. I arrived to the bus stop and noticed about seven women waiting to board the bus. Because I arrived as the bus approached the stop I missed the opportunity to speak to anyone. All of the women boarded the bus, but I chose to stay behind and wait until the next bus passed. I wasn't there more than two minutes before a woman arrived and sat on the same bench I was sitting. About a minute later, another woman arrived and sat at the same bench as well. They were quiet for a moment and

then they began talking about their workday. At this point, I decided to introduce myself in more detail but neither spoke to me. Maria, the woman closest to me, actually got up from her seat and walked away to check if the bus was getting nearer. I continued to explain that I was a student conducting research for my dissertation and explained the purpose of my study. At this point, I showed both women my consent forms. They kept looking at each other as if they were seeking mutual approval or perhaps wondered how they could avoid talking to me, but after explaining who I was, both women stayed and agreed to speak to me. They quickly began asking questions about my study and about the classes I taught at the university. They wanted to speak to me but only while they waited for their bus. Neither would agree to a one-on-one interview because they did not have time and were afraid of losing their job since they had no idea who I was. Isabel sat on the opposite side of the bench and quickly explained that neither one of them could keep the consent form because they were afraid it would be confiscated at the bridge. We discussed the research project in great detail and in the end, it led to a 25-minute conversation about their work status, their life in Nuevo Laredo, and their strategies for working in Laredo, even though they possessed what they referenced as a U.S. “tourist permission.” Fortunately, I was able to speak to them again in different group settings during the weeks ahead.

Future conversations with all of the domestic workers took place in the afternoons as we waited for the bus to take them back to the main bus station. However, there were several informal conversations we had at all locations, including the bus station. On several occasions I boarded the bus with them and walked to the bridge as

they made their way home. On average, the time spent from their job sites to the bridge was about 50 minutes to an hour, depending on the time they arrived to the bus stop.

On three separate occasions, I drove one domestic worker from her job to her home and two other women from their jobs to the downtown Laredo bus station. Because I live in the same neighborhood where many of the women work, there were instances where I was driving in or out of my subdivision (morning and afternoon) and saw many of them walk into or out of the area. There was a fourth young domestic worker I had spoken with about three days before offering her a ride after her workday, but she refused my offer of a ride to work and said she did not want to bother me. I told her it was not a problem since I was on my way to work but didn't have an exact time to be there, but she kindly declined again.

Purposive Situational Interviews

Even though my time in the field does not fall under the anthropological ethnographic description of ideal time spent on the field, (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Wolcott, 2005) engagement and intimacy are still evident objectives to this dissertation. My fieldwork extends to a total of about four months. During those months, I engaged in dozens of conversations with about 25 domestic workers where a range of spontaneous topics was discussed: family, food customs, work practices, job fears, border safety, and the hot weather. The participants for this study that are commonly referenced as maids in Laredo, Texas were either employed as live-in nannies/housekeepers, live-out nannies/housekeepers, or job workers/housecleaners (De La Pena, 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997).

Of that number, I completed what I call purposive situational groups with 16 Mexican immigrant domestic workers that varied in length of 15-30 minutes at a time. Of the 16 domestic workers, all were born in Mexico, all but two lived in Nuevo Laredo, and worked in Laredo. Because there were times we spent about 15-30 minutes together, at times I was unable to learn their exact age. All 16 domestic workers were at least 18 years of age, but at least six did not disclose their ages. Of the participants who did, the oldest was 52 and the youngest was 22. They traveled at least twice a week to five to six times a week by bus and all would walk through the Gateway to the Americas International Bridge and into Laredo. The majority of the women boarded a Nuevo Laredo city bus from their homes and traveled to the bridge, walked through the bridge into Laredo, then walked to the downtown bus station, and finally boarded a particular bus to their job site(s).

The purposive situational group sessions fall in line with what Lindlof and Taylor (2011) call ethnographic interviews that occur in a cultural scene where the “investigator is busy hanging out with the people being studied” (p. 176). Moreover, ethnographic interviews take place “in the midst of some other social action, often while the sights and sounds that triggered the question are still fresh in the minds of the researcher and the participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 176). The ethnographic interview mirrors what I reference as the purposive situational group session in that they are held in a cultural scene and there is engagement—a type of social action taking place at the scene. These on the go interviews are informal and can be spontaneous but the difference is that they are held in a group setting and most importantly, a participant’s

contribution may bolster new information, ideas, and opinions for other participants including the researcher. This also falls in line with the rationale of “group effect” in the focus group method where participants “draw upon a shared fund of experiences” and a “cascading effect” takes place where “each person’s turn of the conversation links to, or tumbles out of, the topics and expressions that came before it” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 183). Furthermore, even though these group sessions were informal and mostly spontaneous, I often times asked focused questions or led guided discussions taken from my interview guide or previous notes. The purposive situational group style was essential because it was one of the only ways I could communicate with my participants. Most workers were pressed for time since they were usually returning home. These sessions produced some of the most interesting information about participants’ experiences and perceptions concerning particular safety job practices.

All but one group sessions were held at the two bus stop areas in north Laredo. One was held in a fast food restaurant inside the downtown bus station. These exchanges ranged from two to three domestic workers at one time, yet there were times I had one-on-one exchanges as well. One of the six sessions was recorded but I soon realized my participants were more comfortable when the recorder was not in view. At the same time, recording the sessions did not yield good quality audio since both of these specific bus stops sit on two of the busiest intersections in Laredo, and I couldn’t clearly make out what woman was saying what information. As I returned home, I typed my field notes from each group session and there were even times I wrote down notes in a composition book as soon as our group session ended. However, this was difficult to do

because I stayed at the bus stop after different sessions, and I did not want them to see me write or audio record myself as I was sitting or standing by them in the open space, waiting for the next bus or group of workers. There were times I was unable to write up or type my field notes until the nighttime or the next morning because by the time I arrived to my home, I was too tired to write detailed notes. This on the go interviewing is tiresome and requires much resourcefulness (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 177). I attempted to remember as much as possible, and I tried to write down or type particular words and phrases that struck me as interesting, new, and peculiar. I tried remembering participants' names and ages (if they chose to disclose that information). I also wrote about my thoughts and feelings that emerged from our conversations as well as any lingering questions I had or surprising commentary that was made.

Individual Interviewing

I chose interviewing as a second form of data collection since it is an essential tool used to capture individuals' "attitudes, beliefs, and values" and by using this form of data collection, participants are able to express themselves freely and fully (Mishler, 1986, p. 233). I wanted to interview domestic workers in order to understand how they make sense of their work experiences and their daily work practices. Since I was interested in how domestic workers construct their occupational identity it was important to pay attention to my participants' narratives and reflections of occupational life on the border. In depth and semi-structured interviews along with an interview guide were used to capture participants' narratives and experiences. I used a semi-structured interview guide in order keep a more flexible and conversational approach to the interview.

Moreover, using an interview guide provides the researcher a certain degree of structure yet the pliability to change the question order or drop and add optional questions depending on the participant's "best fit" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 200). All participants were asked the same questions, yet in every interview additional topics emerged and consequently, I inquired further as I deemed appropriate.

I asked questions that were open-ended and evoked stories. I was interested in learning about domestic work in Laredo, border crossing, and becoming knowledgeable about the surrounding work environment. I chose to ask in-depth questions to expand my knowledge on said topics, and asked questions that provided diverse responses and allowed for probes. Examples of such questions were, "What goes through your mind as you cross the bridge for work?" and "How do you decide when to cross into Laredo?" At the same time, Mishler (1986) asserts that treating the participants' answers to questions as stories or narratives, we capture the spirit of their responses. One-on-one interviewing allowed for a more personal feel that elicited narratives about my participants' particular work and life experiences, rather than 15-30 minute sessions that although valuable and allowed for breadth and a certain level of detail, proved to lack in depth. Examples of questions in my interview guide were:

Can you tell me about your first experience doing domestic work?

What does this job mean to you?

What do you say when others ask what you do?

My initial goal was to recruit at least 20 Mexican immigrant women who were presently employed as domestic workers in Laredo, Texas. This was a challenging number since

only one domestic worker (I met from my fieldwork) initially agreed to do an in-depth interview. The rest declined and said they preferred speaking to me during their workday and frankly, many times they did not speak to me at all. It was then I recruited domestic workers using a snowball sample. I chose snowball sampling because it is one of the most fitting methods to seek participants “who have certain attributes in common,” and since domestic workers safeguard their communication and are considered a “hard-to-recruit” population, I realized it was the most appropriate data collection strategy (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 114). I spoke to family and friends who knew domestic workers and even sought help from my key informant and her family. My key informant arranged two interviews and two friends and one family member arranged three separate interviews as well. From these initial five participants, domestic workers contacted additional participants.

At times, I provided my cellular contact information and they called to make concrete plans for an interview. On two separate occasions, after concluding the interview in the participant’s home, friends (that were already in the home) decided to participate as well. In one case, after our interview was completed Carmen told me she would ask her friend (who was in the next room) if she wanted to participate because the interview *estuvo bien*.³ She stepped out of the room and went looking for her friend, Blanca C. I was aware Blanca C. was in the next room because as I arrived to Carmen’s home earlier that day, she and Blanca C. were arriving too. The three of us walked into Carmen’s home but Blanca C. quickly walked into the next room without speaking to

³ Spanish for went well

me, other than saying a quick hello. After Carmen went into the next room Blanca C. stepped out of it and into the dining room area I sat and advised me she too wanted to participate. I was not expecting to conduct a second interview that day, but I was grateful she was willing to participate and agreed. In line with previous domestic work research, trust is one of the most important factors in the data collection practices, and because Carmen's interview experience was positive, she decided to advise her friend that I was trustworthy enough to do it too (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Mendoza, 2009; Romero, 2002). During Blanca C.'s interview, she would tell me that she and Carmen live in the same home and that Carmen had advised her of my visit. Carmen asked Blanca C. if she wanted to participate, but she initially declined and told her that if it went well, to return for her and that she would do it too. As Lindlof & Taylor (2011) assert, "these chains of referral create a growing pool of respondents—a snowball growing larger over time" (p. 114). Of this sub-group, there weren't problems when I asked them to save my cellular number, yet most of these women did not cross the bridge by foot, had relatives in Laredo, or lived in Laredo themselves.

I followed up with my participants and asked if they had contacted additional friends and family members who were interested in participating in the study. This usually took place at the end of an interview. After participants' friends and family members agreed to participate in the study, each provided me with the potential participants' contact information so that I made future interview appointments. After initially agreeing, at least 10 potential participants did not answer my call or text. There

were several times potential participants initially answered my call but asked to call back at another time or day. When I called again, most would not answer the call.

The snowball sample yielded nine additional interviews from the initial five. At the end of the data collection, 14 participants were interviewed for this study. On average, interviews lasted 47 minutes. The shortest interview was about 39 minutes and the longest was 74 minutes. In total, four interviews were conducted by telephone. In these instances, two participants agreed to an interview only if it were conducted by telephone. A third participant could not give me a specific time or place to meet because she was a live-in domestic worker and did not have enough time to meet with me; therefore, I agreed to a telephone interview. During this particular interview, she told me she was also taking care of three kids as she spoke to me. The fourth participant agreed to meet with me, but then canceled and could only reschedule when I was not going to be in Laredo.

Because of this, I agreed to a telephone phone interview as well. Telephone interviews are criticized for a lack of face-to-face interactions and visual cues like facial expressions, gestures, and body posture (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Even though I agree that at times participants can seem detached or uninterested, this was not my experience. Of the four telephone interviews, three participants seemed comfortable and self disclosed valuable stories pertaining to their work practices. My longest interview was completed by telephone. I believe this occurred because they felt more comfortable and perhaps safer in revealing personal information through a telephone rather than face to face.

Transcription of Interviews. Ten interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by hand by me. Four participants did not agree to audio record our interview, and therefore, I took as many detailed notes as I possibly could while focusing on key words and phrases. I quickly jotted down particular quotes that struck me. At the same time however, I did not want to focus too much on writing notes and failing to listen to my participants. Therefore, I tried my best to listen and recall as much information as possible. As I returned home, I jotted as many notes as I could while focusing on particular information that had been previously stated by other participants.

After my data collection, I received a phone call from a participant who asked to withdraw from the study. She advised me that after speaking to her family in Mexico, they had told her it was simply too risky and did not want to jeopardize her job since she had only been living in Laredo for over a year. None of the information in that interview was used in this study and the audio recording and transcription were destroyed.

Demographics

Along with the data collected throughout my fieldwork, a total of 13 one-on-one interviews were used in this study. All interviews and most fieldwork were conducted in Spanish.⁴ Thirteen participants were born in Mexico. One participant was born in Honduras yet self identified as a Mexican immigrant since she had lived in Mexico for most of her life before moving to Laredo, Texas. The youngest participant was 19 years old whereas the oldest was 66 years of age.

⁴ The only exceptions were the informal conversations with family and friends and the two bus drivers throughout my fieldwork. These conversations were in English.

Because I wanted to understand different perspectives, I interviewed domestic workers in varying work categories. For example, of the 13 one-on-one interviews, four were live-in domestic workers and nine fell into the job work category, even though some domestic workers were between live-out and job work occupations. Of the four participants that fell into the live-in category, three were undocumented.⁵ They did not have the proper documentation to live and work in the United States. Live-in domestic workers had their individual bedroom in the employers' homes. One of my participants named Cecilia was employed as a live-in domestic worker for one family but during the week, she would do job work for her employer's friends (who lived in the same neighborhood). Cecilia would do some morning cleaning in the home where she lived and worked and then walked to her employer's friends' homes and cleaned their homes. Finally, she would return by the afternoon as the children arrived from school. It was then she cared for the children, cooked dinner, ironed, and cleaned in order to meet her live-in job duties.

The job work process is also complex because a number of domestic workers have multiple *patronas*⁶ and may work for each on multiple days as well. For example,

⁵ Information about participants' citizenship status emerged during the interviews. However, if a participant disclosed any information about their present status, I did ask follow-up questions to clarify statements. An example is when Veronica, a domestic worker who has lived in Laredo for about 30 years. She tells me she is limited on the jobs she can obtain. I asked if she's tried to apply to other types of jobs since she's experienced a certain level of mistreatment from one *patrona* in particular, but it was then she revealed she did not have legal documentation to live or work in the U.S., even though she was married (but now separated) to a U.S. citizen. She revealed that her husband never wanted to help her immigrate in spite of the fact that they were married for about 20 years and have five children together.

⁶ The Spanish word *patrona* means female employer or boss. During my fieldwork, I learned that most domestic workers in Laredo regard their employer as *la patrona*. As multiple participants explained, domestic workers usually deal with "*la señora de la casa*" (woman of the house), regardless of whether a man is considered the head of household in the home. Because most participants referenced their employer as *la patrona*, I wanted to maintain the fidelity of their words as much as possible.

Veronica was employed by four *patronas* in total but only worked for one twice a week. This meant she worked five days out of the week but had four different *patronas*. Each participant's work circumstances differed in the number of *patronas* they had, the amount of days they worked, and the time spent in each home varied as well. Of the 13 participants, three were daily border crossers meaning that they traveled to work on a daily basis from their homes in Nuevo Laredo to Laredo. Most of these women can legally cross into the U.S. but lack the proper documentation to legally work in the country. The remaining 10 participants lived and worked in Laredo, yet they each had dissimilar citizenship status.

Locating the Self: Positionality and Reflexivity

By engaging in qualitative research, I continuously attempted to understand my positionality and the power imbalance that takes place between the role of researcher and my participants, especially with minority populations. Not only is the underlined goal of doing no harm necessary, (Clark & Sharf, 2007) but it is also considering the trust that has been afforded to me throughout the research process and after. I considered the issue of privacy and confidentiality of domestic workers' accounts and experiences including their immigration status. Even though several participants did not mind using their names for this study, I asked them to choose pseudonyms in order to be cognizant of their privacy. Most participants chose their own pseudonym.

Throughout this process, it was important to be mindful of the relevance of self-reflexivity because it allowed me to look within myself and take notice of my biases. By examining difficult questions like, "Whose story is this," "How is my positionality

working in conjunction with my participants,” and “How is their story told when I consider the power imbalance that exist between us” I gained knowledge and insight on these issues and kept being mindful of those imbalances when circumstances materialized throughout the data collection process. I saw this line of questioning as a reflective lens so as to indicate the “inside” of my own positionality as a Mexican-American scholar who has lived most of her life on same border my participants call home. It was also important to take into account that most of the participants for this study work in homes close to or in the same subdivision where my family resides. My role of a researcher in this entire process was kept in close distance and even questioned in order to safeguard our fundamental guiding principle of doing no harm. While I collected the data, wrote notes, and transcribed I noticed possible categories emerging and made minor notations on the transcripts and field notes as I deemed necessary and important. The final section will detail the data analysis approach I undertook.

Data Analysis

After ending my fieldwork and completing the interviews with the domestic workers, I began analyzing the data in order to answer my research question. This section first includes a discussion of a grounded approach and the data analysis procedure used to analyze the data collected. I will also discuss my approach to the categories that emerged from the open and axial coding used in a grounded approach.

Grounded Approach

Even though traditional grounded theory was not used for this particular research project, a grounded approach was put into practice. Grounded theory is a particular form

of analysis that is widely practiced to analyze qualitative data by “developing theories from research grounded in data rather than deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 4). Glaser and Strauss (1967) first introduced grounded theory, but then there was significant divergence that led to Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) version of the model. Glaser and Strauss were intellectually motivated to use a qualitative research approach as a form of theoretical analysis in opposition to the dominant quantitative methodological approach that was deemed as “real” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 109). However, Strauss and Corbin argued for a systematic approach than a much more emergent approach where there is still an adherence to the constant comparison method. Whereas grounded theory aims to build theory in a bottom up approach, this research project employs the process of induction in a similar way in that it considers observations and developing patterns. The practice of induction pays particular attention to emergent observations and formulating patterns in order to provide general conclusions and implications.

The grounded approach to research is interesting because of its dynamic technique where the researcher maintains an iterative process of generating questions in order to guide the research yet at the same time, keeping an open frame of mind in order to capture as much of the distinctive and complex data. As the data is gathered, the researcher begins to identify and construct particular concepts and descriptions yet keeping an open mind to the connections that are being developed between the data and the conceptual frames and concepts. This form of research is a process, which is underlined in this research project, meaning that it is a complex, open, and at times a

consuming approach. The initial research stage is open, and as the research progresses, the process is that much more methodical and arduous. As Charmaz (1983) stresses, three important points to grounded theory must be emphasized.

The first point is that “grounded theorists shape their data collection from their analytic interpretations and discoveries, and therefore, sharpen their observations. Additionally, they check and fill out emerging ideas by collecting further data. Second, both the processes and products of research are shaped by the data rather than from preconceived logically deduced theoretical frameworks. Grounded theorists rely heavily on studying their data and reading in other fields during the initial stages of research. They do not rely directly on the literature to shape their ideas, since they believe that they should develop their own analyses independently. Third, grounded theorists do not follow the traditional quantitative canons of verification. They do, however, check their developing ideas with further specific observations, make systematic comparisons between observations, and, often take their research beyond the confines of one topic, setting, or issue” (p. 110).

These three factors let me to a grounded approach of analyzing the data. These data driven factors direct the researcher to sort and categorize the data that is known as coding (Charmaz, 1983; Charmaz, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Coding allows the researcher to label or categorize the data into concepts or terms from the literature, but as Lindlof and Taylor (2011) suggests, it is important to bring into play codes that utilize “firsthand evidence” (p. 250). Moreover, codes provide the researcher to “summarize,

synthesize, and sort many observations made of the data,” and as Charmaz (1983) stresses, a usual question that arises while reading and sorting through the data is, “What do I see going on here?” (p. 112).

Initial and Axial Coding

There are two types of initial coding: open and in vivo coding. Both are central to the initial rationale that calls for the researcher to begin discovering ideas and issues that are inside the data (Charmaz, 1983). This process begins through open coding where the researcher begins going through the data, line by line and coding it by looking at its “coherent meaning (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 251). Through this form of coding, as Strauss contends, “opens up the inquiry” and allows for categories to be built, questioned, rethought, and even changed. Examples of open codes from this dissertation are, “devaluing work” and “satisfied with work.” Another type of initial coding is in vivo coding where researchers utilize the exact words from their participants in order to capture the words used to describe their perception or as Lindlof and Taylor (2011) state, participants are able to “characterize their own scene” (p. 251). Examples of *in vivo* codes from this dissertation are “*yo valgo*” and “*trabajo duro*.” Atlas.ti version 7 was utilized as my qualitative data analysis tool, which allowed me to import my transcripts and most of my field notes in order to begin the coding process. A small portion of the data was coded as I collected it, yet most of the data was coded after all interviews and field notes were imported to Atlas.ti. I did line by line coding, and as this process progressed, it was important to implement the constant comparative method in order to

have a sound understanding of the similarity and/or difference between the categories that were emerging from the two types of initial coding throughout the data.

It was also significant to understand the importance of raising the categorization to another level by integrating categories by a process called axial coding. The process of axial coding allowed me to integrate categories and find the “deeper meaning” of them as I differentiated and sorted through the data categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 252).

In keeping with the research question of how Mexican immigrant domestic workers construct their occupational identity, I began to further amalgamate the said categories and as this process continued, two thematic categories were meaningful and representative of the data: domestic workers protecting their jobs and immigrant workers find meaning in their work to *salir adelante*. Chapters Three and Four explain the data analysis of this undertaking.

CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS: ENACTING JOB PROTECTION PRACTICES

My analysis generated a substantial amount of information detailing how Mexican immigrant domestic workers construct their occupational identity. Chapter Three examines how domestic workers enact job protection practices and begins to answer how Mexican immigrant and transnational domestic workers construct their occupational identity. I begin by first detailing the state of the Laredo-Nuevo Laredo border, followed by a brief discussion focusing on border crossing into Laredo, Texas in order to make sense of the ongoing conditions that transpire in the city. The scope of this chapter is to draw attention to domestic workers' discursive practices. More specifically, I discuss how border crossing domestic workers enact particular protection job practices on the border in order to safeguard their occupation. I also examine how domestic workers explore other ways of protecting their job when their occupation is overwhelmingly their main source of income for themselves and their families.

El Puente Viejo

The Gateway to the Americas Bridge or as it is commonly known, El Puente Viejo,⁷ is located in downtown Laredo, Texas. Laredo has four operational bridges located within the city that serve as different ports of entry, but El Puente Viejo is the only bridge between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo that is accessible to pedestrians. In order

⁷ *El Puente Viejo* is one of the most popular local names for the Gateway to the Americas Bridge. Its meaning stems from being the oldest international bridge in Laredo. "The Old Bridge" was destroyed in 1954 and was reconstructed in 1956 ("Texas-Mexico International Bridges," 2011).

to enter the U.S., the four-lane bridge is accessible to pedestrians 24 hours a day and seven days a week for \$0.75.

Domestic workers advised me that their work schedule was hectic because of the morning commute. As I waited for the bus one morning, three women standing in front of me were discussing the long lines on the bridge. Each woman discussed her journey and one domestic worker in particular said she almost missed the bus because of the hours spent on the bridge. Many of them begin their day as early as 6 a.m. to make their way to the bridge. However, the long lines at the bridge impede a smooth journey from their homes to their job sites. As a bus driver informed me, most domestic workers cross into the U.S. between 7 a.m. to 10 a.m., making the first routes of 7 a.m., 8:15 a.m., and 9:30 a.m. the busiest of the day. The afternoons are also busy times, but those times are spread out between the hours of 2:30 p.m. – 7 p.m. as they make their way back to the downtown area and eventually to their home in Nuevo Laredo or take a second bus to make their way home into a Laredo neighborhood.

One of the most congested times to cross from Nuevo Laredo to Laredo by foot is during the morning hours of Monday through Friday. The wait time can be anywhere from five minutes to 120 minutes, depending on the specific time a person crosses. There are a number of reasons for the extensive wait time. First, there is a high volume of Nuevo Laredo residents crossing during the morning peak hours for work, school, and even leisure activities. Second, because each pedestrian must declare any necessary items to cross into the United States and present legal documentation to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents, long lines are generated. As most participants

affirmed, there are also instances in which CBP agents may request travelers to open their handbags or other carryalls and satchels that are visible to the eye. Agents go through their personal items and according to my participants, hardly any person crossing to the U.S. questions any law enforcement agent. Additionally, at least four participants (and other passerby daily border crossers) admitted there were times when agents even inspected their cellular phones. This new information led to modifications and a keen awareness that protecting their jobs meant more than what took place inside the worksite. It became evident that my participants went through distinct job protection practices that are uncommon to the average U.S. worker.

Keeping a Watchful Eye

“No, es que yo no puedo cruzar eso conmigo. Mejor dígame lo que dice porque yo no puedo cargar con eso.” Viri was straightforward with her words. She wanted nothing to do with the IRB approved information sheet I provided. She declared her apprehension and opted for me to give her an oral account and description of the IRB form since she wouldn’t take the form, and I quickly realized she was not going to be the only one with similar concerns. Because most transnational workers cannot legally work in the U.S. they are in constant fear of being caught working without a work visa. Most transnational workers I spoke to had a strong desire to discuss the obstacles and complications faced on the border and Viri was no exception. However, she made sure she took the necessary steps to safeguard her job. Viri asked if it was necessary to read and keep the IRB information sheet because she did not want to keep any materials, and after verbally going through the participant information form, she agreed to participate. I

reminded myself to make a bulleted list in order to ensure that all aspects of the form were discussed with future potential participants.

Viri, a Mexican citizen, has been a transnational domestic worker for over two years and from the moment she began working in the U.S. she was aware of the safety precautions needed to be taken in order to safeguard her employment. Earning \$240 weekly is strongly desired in Nuevo Laredo and unfortunately, not many jobs without higher education can offer that amount of money. Because she is a single mother, the money going into her household is immeasurable. Viri understands the importance of protecting her job but it isn't something that consumes her life. She remembers being told by an older domestic worker that knowing her story well is particularly important when crossing the bridge into the U.S. This meant Viri had to think through the reasons she would cross into the U.S. frequently, just in case CBP agents questioned her as she crossed into the country. She had a couple of good friends who lived in Laredo and at first she shifted her stories from time to time. When asked, Viri would tell agents she was visiting friends and spent the day with them. Of course, she made sure her friends knew this information first. Other days however, she quickly reminded the agents that Wednesdays and Fridays are her shopping days. Viri confesses that CPB agents can be "*chismosos*"⁸ and like to get involved in border crossers' affairs, but at the same time she understands they are doing their job. Viri doesn't excuse some of the CBP agents' behavior because it seems that the rules change for them every day. She mentions how one day CBP doesn't say a word, yet other days they check your bags even though they

⁸ Spanish for gossip

have told Viri they are not allowed. *“Un dia no te dicen nada y pasas y otros dias te checan las bolsas, y luego otros dias abro mi bolsa antes que me digan nada, y me han dicho ellos mismos que no pueden hacer eso. No se les entiende.”*

It’s a frustrating process and like Viri, Maria and Isabel don’t like to carry papers or U.S. numbers because they cannot legally seek U.S. employment. They believe CBP agents however play a daily game with transnational workers because as they explained, CBP agents know exactly who they are and what they are doing when they cross the bridge into the U.S. *“Se hacen que no saben lo que hacemos pero si saben.”* Isabel believes CBP agents know domestic workers cross daily into the U.S. to work but pretend to be oblivious. Isabel also reminds Maria and I that agents know all too well about their employment in Laredo because many of their employers are CBP agents themselves or the agents’ wives. Maria and Isabel assert that many of their previous employers have been law enforcement agents who turn a blind eye when they attempt to hire domestic workers. It is a different yet powerful understanding on the “don’t ask, don’t tell” narrative where agents do not explicitly ask their own workers if they can legally work in the U.S. or prove they are documented residents. It also allows domestic workers to keep their status a secret. In this case, agents enforce the law at their own worksite but show constrain of the law in their own homes.

Maria and Isabel grabbed the IRB approved information sheet but then returned it to me. Maria cannot be too cautious when it comes to her job because she understands her family is depending on the money she takes home. She agreed to participate in the study but when I asked if she would save my number on her cellular phone in order to

set up an interview, she declined. Maria spoke to me that afternoon and on other occasions while she waited for the bus to take her to the main transit center.

I surmised that my participants would be uncomfortable with signing an IRB consent form and was able to obtain verbal consent approval, but I did not realize they would take issue in me distributing an information sheet. However, I promptly made adjustments to their needs. Throughout the data collection process, I observed varying job protection practices that domestic workers performed. Upon reflecting on my observations however, I recognized and acknowledged that the first and most significant job protection practice performed was the negotiation of consent between them and me. During these exchanges, my participants were eager to participate yet they first alleviated any uncertainties and safeguarded their employment by requesting a verbal discussion and declining to read and at times even hold the information sheet. My participants were clear in their initial discussions with me. They wanted to ensure their jobs were not jeopardy since carrying U.S. documents in and out of the country could easily yield further inquiry and a potential tense and stressful exchange between them and CBP agents at the bridge. From our initial conversations, their identity of work encompassed a collective occupational self where their occupational identity exceeded the workplace. This led to an understanding that asserts how domestic workers' occupational identity forms "in and across many sites" outside of the workplace (Ashcraft, 2013, p. 13).

One afternoon I was standing by the Winfield bus stop next to an older woman. We were both sweating and waiting for the 12A bus route to take us to the downtown

Laredo transit center. We struck a conversation about the distinct flowers and plants that were by us. This particular bus stop sits immediately outside one of the most affluent Laredo communities and rather than stand by the bus-stop bench after its three seats are filled, domestic workers usually stand by the trees and bushes that sit on one side of the bench. There are particular areas a person can get some shade and domestic workers try to find these spots. Lorena and I stood by some of these trees and bushes and after a couple of minutes I explained my research project and my interest in her consenting to an interview with me. Our conversation was quiet enough where no one could hear what we were discussing and she seemed comfortable and even interested in my explanation. I decided to reach into my backpack and supply her with an information sheet approved by my university's IRB. She grabbed it but was cautious. She looked at the other women who were standing nearby to ensure they weren't looking our way or perhaps listening to our conversation.

As I continued to speak and explain some of the details, she kept a watchful eye of her surroundings and moved a couple of steps back. She motioned with her hand that I move back as well. I did exactly what she was doing and as she felt more comfortable she told me she would participate if other women were not standing by us. She grabbed the information sheet and folded it a couple of times until it fit a small plastic bag where she had carried her lunch that morning. Lorena did not trust some of the women because she was new to the area. She was employed by one of her neighbor's friends. She took care of an older woman for about seven years and up until three months ago she never traveled to the north side of Laredo. However, after a long illness, her employer passed

away and she was left without a job. Lorena had a couple of acquaintances but not many friends among the workers.

She felt uneasy about discussing private topics for every one to hear, but at the same time she did not have enough time for a separate interview. Her apprehension did not stem from the other domestic workers per se; she was worried some of the women sitting by the bus stop and riding in the bus were “*trabajadores del gobierno*.”⁹ Because she cannot legally work in the U.S. she is mindful about the information she discloses to others, especially if she is in an open area. One of Lorena’s neighbors informed her about a former city employee claiming that Border Patrol agents would routinely observe and at times spy on the workers by riding the city routes. She did not want to lose her job but more importantly, Lorena was working in Laredo without proper documentation and ran the risk of losing her crossing privileges and her visa. She was nervous and anxious during our first conversation but said she felt comfortable talking to me. We spoke for about 20 minutes before the bus arrived to transport us to the downtown station and moments before the bus stopped, she reached into her plastic bag and returned the information sheet I provided. I assume I had a puzzled look because she offered some detail by saying that she would consent to our conversations but she couldn’t walk around the city and especially the border area with a U.S. document. Lorena explained she had a tourist visa and therefore, there was no reason to possess any documents that would tell otherwise. She was not going to take that chance with me.

⁹ Spanish for government workers

Once on the bus, Lorena confessed she is careless and wouldn't want to leave the consent form for anyone to view it. She thought it would be best to quickly read the form and return it to me. I agreed and she returned the form. Lorena didn't want to run the risk of forgetting the consent form in the plastic bag since she uses the same bag to carry her food everyday. There are times agents have questioned why she crosses the bridge with food, but she simply replies by saying she needs to consume small meals every two hours. If the CBP would find the consent form, it would lead to further questioning and quite possibly put her in a vulnerable position of losing her job and her visa.

I failed to consider the ramifications of my participants being in possession of the information sheet, but after several women informed me of their uncertainty, my participants and I made individual modifications in how they received the necessary participant information. In many instances, I verbally explained all aspects of the information sheet and other times, my participants would read the information sheet and return it to me in order to prevent any potential complications or difficult conversations between law enforcement and them.

Lorena and I spoke on three occasions and every single time she looked to both sides making sure no one was watching or listening to our conversations. After our first conversation I asked her to write down my cellular number or save it on her phone but she declined. It was too risky and she didn't want the CBP going through her phone and finding a "*numero Americano*."¹⁰ She was not alone.

¹⁰ Spanish for American number

Irma, a transnational worker for the past nine years, is particularly careful of the information she exchanges and confesses that the only reason she felt comfortable speaking to me was because one of her best friends told her I was a “*maestra haciendo un trabajo de nosotras*.¹¹” I had spoken to her friend a couple of months before I met Irma and it became apparent I wasn’t a threat to her. Irma has a difficult time trusting people especially on this side of the border. We spoke for no more than 20 minutes and on only one occasion, but her words were compelling. Irma is careful and guarded because she’s faced some difficulties on the border. She travels to Laredo at least three times a week, but for the past year she makes it a point to cross without anything *Americano*. About a year ago, CBP agents questioned her for about an hour as she attempted to enter Laredo with a tourist visa. After a difficult line of questioning, they allowed to enter Laredo.

She understands the importance of knowing what your story will be at the moment you cross, and even though she tried to be cognizant of the information she disclosed at that time, she never realized her cellular phone could be in contention between she and the CBP agents questioning her that morning. As they looked through her belongings, agents asked if they could go through her cellular contacts; she obliged and became nervous as she mentally went through her contact list. An agent asked why she had so many American contacts if she didn’t have family in Laredo. She told him her contacts were friends. The agent pressed further and asked if her friends would affirm her statements if he called them one by one. She responded with a simple “yes” and told

¹¹ Spanish for teacher doing research on us (domestic workers)

her to be cautious of who makes it into her contact list. Nothing else was said and after that incident, she refuses to carry her cellular phone into Laredo. Irma didn't cross into the U.S. for about a week and on the day she returned, her husband accompanied her. She was especially nervous that day and every day thereafter. It is important for Irma to protect her job, even if it means not communicating with her family the days she works in Laredo.

For Lupita, crossing the bridge into the U.S. is nothing new. She has been doing this for decades, and because she been a domestic worker for 35 years, Lupita has seen plenty of changes and approaches to how CBP agents communicate with border crossers. She admits there are times when agents ask too many questions and wouldn't consider it an easy crossing process for those who are working in the U.S. Today, Lupita attempts to coordinate her work schedule in order to only cross three times a week because she has found it more problematic to cross more frequently due to a recent increase in questioning at the point of entry. Lupita's schedule fluctuates as the CBP inquiries increase or decrease.

Yo por eso nadamas trato de cruzar tres dias y es que hace un tiempo se puso muy dificil porque preguntan a que vas todos los dias. Y a que pasas todos los dias? Este, que compras? Hmm, a mi ahora me ayuda mucho que mi hija es ciudadana Americana, gracias a Dios, y este aqui nacio y aqui trabaja y este ya me ayuda mucho eso. Yo ya digo vengo a ver a mi hija. Y me preguntan en donde trabaja. Y este, ya no lo veo tan dificil porque vengo a ver a mis hijos.

That is why I try crossing only three days and that's because it was difficult to cross because they ask where you are going that you have to cross every day.

And why do you cross every day? What do you purchase? Hmm, what helps me now is that my daughter is an American citizen, thank God, and she was born here and she works here and that helps me a lot. Now I saw I come visit my daughter. And they ask where she works. And I don't think it's that difficult because I come visit my children.

Lupita's two children were born in the U.S. and since her daughter now lives and works in Laredo, it has become less stressful to organize her work schedule since she has concrete responses to the agents' questions. They often ask where her daughter works but has no problem disclosing that information since it is solid and truthful. My participants mostly agreed that as concrete relationships are established in the U.S., less strategic planning is needed and more importantly, the less worrisome and stressful the crossing process becomes.

Transnational domestic workers enact distinct job protection practices in order to bypass or alleviate tense and complex interactions at the bridge. Many domestic workers plan and strategize in order to "get their story straight" when communicating with CBP agents at the bridge. Most transnational domestic workers I spoke with perform diverse job protection practices that allow them to safeguard their occupation. In addition to planning and rehearsing their stories, transnational domestic workers strategically shop at local stores in the downtown area.

Maribel crosses into the U.S. four times a week and considers adjusting her work schedule because CBP agents make more in depth inquiries on her crossing days. As she became aware of these additional inquiries, Maribel began shopping at a small downtown clothing store where she makes small purchases. On occasion, she purchases inexpensive plastic sandals, socks, but most of her purchases are *chucherías*¹² like fantasy earrings and bracelets, and at times she buys small ornaments for the home. “*No, es que uno tiene que buscarle y ver como hacerle porque los hombres del puente te preguntan mucho. Que a donde vas y porque hoy y no mañana. Si, a veces se pone feo porque alamejor no les gusta como contestas pero ay que ayarle y luego cambiarle porque se acuerdan de ti y luego come le haces?*” Maribel is aware that as agents’ inquiries become extensive and rigorous, she must also modify her explanations and justifications for crossing as often as she does. Making these adjustments are necessary and something that isn’t taken lightly.

Because Lupita has been a domestic worker for more than three decades and is familiar with how the line of questioning fluctuates based on traffic and political climate, she has noticed the process in which she and other domestic workers utilize store bought goods in order to bypass or at least alleviate agents’ further inquiry. Lupita stresses the importance of knowing what a person is going to say to an agent at the bridge beforehand or what a person carries with them in order to reduce the uncertainty and stress. Planning is important and if a domestic worker returns a purchase and has a receipt, the process is less challenging. “*Si, a veces tambien lo que antes hacia y a veces*

¹² Spanish for knick knacks or trinkets

todavia lo hago es que compras cosas en el centro, ropa y traes recibos o voy hacer este pago y ya estas safada. Ya no preguntan tanto. O tambien un cambio de ropa, asi. Eso puede uno hacer.” Even though she has noticed an overall decrease in the inquiry process at the bridge, she still utilizes some of the techniques in order to protect her employment.

Lupita: Si, vamos de compras or decimos vamos a HEB a comprar mandado, leche, asi. Si le preguntan muchas cosas. Y hasta preguntan, “Y porque no lo compras en Nuevo Laredo?” Y pos les digo es que esta mas economico aca. Si, pues es que nunca saben lo que les van a preguntar a uno.

Ariadne: Y no siempre a sido asi, verdad?

Lupita: Antes no preguntaban tanto pero un tiempo para aca si se puso muy dificil pero casi nunca sabes que te van a preguntar.

Lupita: Yes, we say we’re going to shop or we’re going to HEB to purchase groceries, milk, things like that. Yes, they do ask us many things. They even ask, “And why don’t purchase your items in Nuevo Laredo?” And well I tell them that’s it’s more economical over here. Yes, it’s because you never know what they are going to ask us.

Ariadne: It hasn’t always been that way, right?

Lupita: Before, they wouldn’t ask so much but it was difficult for some time and you hardly know what they will ask.

At times, CBP agents remember which domestic workers crossed into the U.S. from previous days. This can be a difficult process because domestic workers must keep track

of what they say. There are occasions when agents probe into domestic workers' explanations characteristic of Lupita being asked why she didn't shop in her hometown of Nuevo Laredo after explaining to the agent she was crossing into Laredo to do her shopping of the day.

As domestic workers attempt to protect their employment, many are ready to do their shopping at the HEB grocery store in downtown Laredo or other small shops in the surrounding area. Domestic workers stop by these local stores in the mornings on their way to work and others stop on their way from work as they make their way back to Nuevo Laredo. On different occasions, a number of domestic workers purchase groceries at the HEB grocery store. Domestic workers agree that many grocery items are less expensive in U.S. stores than in Mexico. It is not uncommon to see dozens of domestic workers in and out of the grocery store in the early mornings or during the late afternoons purchasing bread, deli meats, as well as other baked goods. As they do their grocery shopping many domestic workers also take advantage of purchasing extra items they know they'll return the next day or two.

One early morning I rode Route 16 that would take us into one of the most popular bus stops for domestic workers. This particular bus stop is popular since it sits outside two affluent communities located in front of one another. When a person enters the bus, it is common for passengers to fill the back of the bus first in order for passengers to be seated at a faster pace. It is also an implicit rule that elderly passengers sit towards the front of the bus regardless of when they transport since the front area is open and easier to access. On this particular day most of the bus was full and those of us

standing towards the end of the passenger line didn't have any other place to sit but on the "elder" front of the bus. I normally sat toward the back or middle of the bus so that I could see most of the passengers as we traveled the route but not this particular morning. As I sat on the front area of the bus I began making small conversation with two women on my left and it was then I noticed two older women sitting in front of me.

One of the women, Patricia, had two grocery bags in a carryall and seemed uncomfortable because she removed the bags from the carryall and carried them on her lap along with her handbag. The carryall had to be positioned in a way that wouldn't interfere with other passengers, and she had it leaned up against her legs. Even though I had never spoken to either woman, we had seen each other on the bus stops for several months and both were always friendly but at the same time kept their distance. One of the grocery bags she carried comprised of several grocery items for a cake: two boxes of yellow cake mix, one can of white frosting, and a cake decorating tool with several attachments. I kept looking at that particular bag because I wondered why she would purchase these specific items in Laredo when Nuevo Laredo has less expensive and better quality baked goods like cakes or *pan de dulce*.¹³ I imagine I kept staring at her grocery bags with much intent because she yelled out that said items were for a cake. "*Es para un pastel,*" she called out and smiled. The bus was noisy and full and even though she yelled this information, I noticed that no one else was paying attention but her friend and me. I smiled at both women, nodded so they knew I heard and understood, and then asked if she would be baking the cake on that same day. Patricia nodded in

¹³ Spanish for sweet bread

agreement but then yelled out, “*Ahorita hablamos*”¹⁴ and motioned with her head that we would speak once we exited the bus. About 15 minutes later, she and her friend exited.

Earlier that morning, I paid a double fare to stay through entire bus route and return to the downtown station and had no intention of exiting the bus, but the next thing I knew I was walking with them into the Alexander Estates neighborhood. This was one of many occasions where my plans were altered or overall suspended. Domestic workers are busy women and on several occasions I modified my plans and schedule in order to accommodate theirs. Patricia noticed I kept looking at her grocery bag and she wanted to share several techniques used by domestic workers. She later informed me I previously interviewed one of her good friends and even though she did not have time for an interview, she wanted to discuss the ways in which she and her friends bypass extensive and meticulous questioning at the bridge. Patricia knew exactly who I was because the first thing out of her mouth after we exited the bus stop was to make sure I tell them who they are. I am still unsure who “them” or as she told me in Spanish “*ellos*” are but was adamant I share her story.

On that particular morning, Patricia arrived to the grocery store in the early morning since she had to shop at the grocery before she arrived to work. It was her employer’s husband’s birthday and she was making a cake for the family to celebrate the occasion. Although she usually makes her cakes from scratch, today was different because she was pressed for time. Patricia’s workday was different from other days; it

¹⁴ Spanish for “We’ll speak in a little while”

was going to be a long and strenuous day being that her *patrona* asked her to clean the entire home and decorate it for a small gathering the family was having that evening. She was also in charge of preparing the night's dinner and cake. Patricia realized it would be too much work to bake her usual birthday cake and she and her *patrona* agreed in baking it from a box as long as the frosting and decorations were unique and home made.

While she was at the grocery store that morning, Patricia realized she had to cross back into Laredo the following day and interestingly, a day she does not cross into Laredo. She usually doesn't work on Sundays, but because her employer was entertaining that night, she was asked to work the next day to help clean and get things back in order. She explained that CBP agents rarely probe workers if they cross sporadically or at least in a nonconsecutive manner, but when workers cross daily, the line of questioning increases. Patricia determined the need for a sound rationale to cross into Laredo and alleviate further questioning or problems. That morning, Patricia purchased two boxes of cake mix yet made additional purchases purposely. She purchased frosting and a decorating tool even though she wasn't utilizing those two items. Her intent was to use them as a precautionary negotiation tool. In case CBP agents questioned Patricia, she was ready with both items and a receipt. She was keenly aware that further inquiry leads to concrete complications and setbacks like CBP agents realizing she works in Laredo without the proper documentation and privileges. Patricia confessed that enacting similar job protection practices are part of the job and something she's done over the years. *"Ay que ayar como trabajar de este lado, ay que buscarle."*

Domestic workers find it necessary to discursively protect their occupation by mitigating the interrogation process at the bridge. I saw Patricia a week later and spoke for a few minutes after her workday ended while she waited for her bus to arrive; we quickly spoke as I attempted to determine if she had in fact run into any complications at the bridge on that Sunday morning and if she returned to the grocery store to obtain a refund. She confessed that once she arrived to Nuevo Laredo later that evening a relative opened the frosting not knowing her intentions. She returned to Laredo the following morning and did not face extensive inquiry since she quickly displayed her receipt along with the cake-decorating tool she purchased the previous morning. CBP agents asked her why she was crossing, and she quickly informed them that the decorating tool was not the correct item her sister needed and had exchange it. Patricia didn't know if an agent recognized her because she tries not to make eye contact as they speak to her but that doesn't matter to her. Patricia knows her "*sistema*"¹⁵ works and relies on it. It's what keeps her safe and more importantly, "*sin angustia*."¹⁶ The information Patricia provided was sufficient and she crossed without further difficulty. Performing these job protection practices clearly points to the direction that for domestic workers like Patricia, their occupational identity exceeds the workplace (Ashcraft, 2013).

Employing Strategic Discursive Practices

The first section of this chapter revealed that domestic workers' occupational identity is constructed and negotiated by being vigilant and observant of their surroundings in order to protect their occupation and more importantly, their livelihood.

¹⁵ Spanish for system

¹⁶ Spanish for without anguish

Workers' collective occupational selves move beyond the traditional work site and extend to distinct yet significant occupational conditions brought upon by the characteristics of the occupation itself.

The second section of this chapter describes domestic workers' strategic discursive practices as they protect their jobs while crossing into the city of Laredo. This section also describes varying protection practices domestic workers enact at work in order to effectively manage their time, negotiate a higher pay rate, or strategically voice their concerns for unfair or poor treatment. Domestic workers find interesting strategies to make their opinions heard and voice their points of view at particular moments throughout their workday all while being mindful of protecting the occupation.

I met Norma at one of the bus stops in north Laredo. She is a young domestic worker. She is tall and slender with long black hair that goes down to her waist. She caught my attention because as she sat at one of the bus benches she let out a long and loud sigh. "Ahhh," she exclaimed. She was exhausted and didn't realize her own volume because it startled me and as I jumped up, she looked over at me and laughed. We didn't speak that day but about a week later we saw each other again and began our conversation.

At 22 years of age, she has been employed with the same four families for about four years. She considers herself lucky because all four employers live within a five-block radius and doesn't have to trek a long distances between jobs. She considers three of her four employers nice, fair, and generous, but confesses she would quit her job at

“esa casa mugrosa.”¹⁷ This particular employer was the first to offer her a job, and even though she cares about the family, her *patrona* keeps adding job duties with no increase in pay. Her employer pays her \$35 twice a week and Norma considers it substantially low since her three other employers pay her \$60 and has lesser duties. Although she considers this unfair she cannot quit. Her *patrona* is the link to her other three employers and Norma worries about the repercussions it could have on her other three jobs. Three of the four employers are related and the fourth is a close friend to the family. *“Para mi que me despiden. A veces digo que le voy a comentar a mis patronas de lo que me paga la señora pero me da miedo. Que si le van con el chisme? No puedo arriesgarme. Ni modo, me tengo que aguantar.”*

Even though Norma wants to speak up, she keeps quiet and continues to perform her job duties without complaining about the difference in pay between her *patronas*. She is scared of speaking up and losing her job. She cannot take those risks, and therefore, she knows she cannot voice her concerns. By concealing her discontent she is in fact protecting her job. She spoke to me about different ways she has wanted to generate a conversation with that one employer, but she hasn't figured out how to do it. *“Un dia le digo algo pero ni se por donde.”* The impact of a pay increase would be significant for Norma since the pay difference totals to \$200 monthly. Still, Norma isn't willing to jeopardize her entire pay for \$200. For Norma, it means risking a monthly income of about \$1,720 and that amount of money means more to her than an increase of \$200. With her parents living with her in Nuevo Laredo with little to no income and

¹⁷ The literal Spanish translation is “that filthy house” yet in this context Norma words were more to the effect of the displeasure she felt for the employer and shared no opinion of the home's state of cleanliness.

having two young boys of her own, Norma didn't see the urgency of raising the pay issue with her employer for some time.

Many domestic workers told me similar stories about the issue of pay. For some, the issue of pay was clear and many domestic workers had a positive rapport with their employers. If they had a question or concern in regards to pay, employers were open and willing to listen to them. For most domestic workers however, the issue of pay is different in that many domestic workers hardly discuss a pay increase as the years progress or even if domestic workers are asked to perform additional duties from their normal workload. There is hardly a conversation about a pay increase, and domestic workers feel uncomfortable leading the discussion. Past research on domestic workers has also shown similar occurrences of difficult and complicated conversations relating to pay. Research has also shown that employers and employees rarely if at all even engage in said conversations (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Romero, 2002).

Months later, I saw Norma on Route 12B, and she and I spoke for about 15 to 20 minutes. It was an early Friday morning and we discussed my weekend plans and the increasing amount of grading I had that particular weekend. She spoke about a *carne asada*¹⁸ she was having at her home to celebrate her son's birthday. After discussing our weekend plans, she remembered our past conversations relating to pay because after a few seconds of silence, she excitedly said, "*¿Que cree?*"¹⁹ I didn't have time to answer her inquiry because she quickly continued to elaborate her point. She reminded me of

¹⁸ Spanish for barbeque. This Spanish phrase is popular in South Texas and refers to a social gathering consisting of Tex-Mex foods like beef and chicken fajitas, beef sausage, borracho beans, pico de gallo, and tortillas.

¹⁹ The literal translation of Norma's words is saying, "What do you think?" but in this particular context, this phrase suggests more of an exclamation of "Guess what!"

our previous conversation relating to her *patrona* and the problems she was having with the pay variance between she and her three employers. She remained at all four jobs but she excitedly told me her pay had increased at that initial home—the connection to her three other jobs. It wasn't the \$60 her other employers paid, but it was an increase of \$15, and she was content.

Norma's approach was interesting because even though she refused to directly voice her concerns and request an increase due to a material threat of losing her job, she decided to do it one day. It was planned and strategically executed. Rather than seeking a direct approach with her employer, she was mindful of her employer's daily disposition and paid close attention to her interactions to decipher how her employer would react to Norma's request. She thought about her approach every day, and mentioned it took a couple of weeks until she felt comfortable voicing her opinion on the weekly pay.

One day, Norma realized her employer received two pieces of good news from her family and she knew that day would be the day she requested a pay increase, but she was tactical because weeks before this encounter, Norma spoke to one of her other employers and confessed the disparate pay amounts between the four employers. Her employer suggested she communicate the differences of pay to the employer paying her the least amount of money (Norma's two employers are related to each other.). She was the kindest of her four employers and she and Norma had excellent rapport. Norma asked if she was in agreement in mentioning her name as a way to open the conversation between she and the employer she was having problems with. She agreed and now she had a plan; all she needed was the ideal opportunity. Norma was strategic with her style

and language use. *“Le dije que tenia mucha verguenza pero que me habia preguntado su hermana (mi otra patrona) que cuanto me pagan sus hermanas y no pudo creer que ella me pagaba muy poco y es que sabe el tamaño de su casa.”*

When her employer’s sister realized she earned significantly less money than her other jobs, she was embarrassed and couldn’t believe the substantial difference in pay. Norma told me her other employer did inquire about the pay rate but it had been more than a year since the last time she asked, but because she granted Norma permission to use her name she utilized the information she had previously received from her. Norma used that information as a way to engage in a conversation with the employer. She told her *patrona* that the last thing she wanted was to put her in a negative light with her relatives (Norma’s three other employers) but she felt she couldn’t lie since the information might make its way back to her. Norma told me her employer was quiet and walked away. She did not utter a word, and after spending some time in the bedroom, she sat by the kitchen where Norma was cooking.

Norma’s *patrona* was embarrassed and asked if \$50 would make her happy. *“Yo le dije que si y fin de conversación. Se miraba enojada con sus fachas²⁰ pero yo dije muchas gracias y sunto arreglado.”* She agreed on the amount but looked upset. Their relationship changed in that her employer wasn’t as talkative as before, but she doesn’t regret her decision. Unfortunately, a couple of days later, her employer gave her two additional duties: watering the lawn and plants and cleaning the outdoor window treatments. Her employer informed Norma that if she performed the two additional

²⁰ The Spanish word “*fachas*” refers to a particular look a person gives another. In this context, Norma suggests her *patrona* was upset because of the “look” she gave her.

duties, she would increase her pay to what her other employers (her own sisters) pay her. The pay difference is \$20 weekly. Norma's pay did increase but so did her job duties. However, what is interesting about her approach is that she employs a particular strategy to speak when it is appropriate and suitable to inquire or raise concerns. She engages in particular discursive practices that involve intention, strategy, and patience.

Domestic work is complex and demanding and workers at times believe they are restricted in speaking out and criticizing their employer even though domestic workers may regard it as necessary. My participants found distinct strategies in order to voice their opinions, concerns, and even complaints. They enact subtle yet effective discursive practices to make their point understood and still appease their employer. There are times domestic workers voice their concerns with no material impact. Nonetheless, my participants found it necessary to express their points of view regardless of the effect. It was important for domestic workers to find a space to communicate complicated situations.

As a domestic worker, Veronica has lived through her share of disdain and disrespect. Veronica does job work and works in four different homes. She has a positive relationship with three employers, but she has had significant problems with her fourth employer.

Veronica: Si me gusta mi trabajo nadamas que asi de repente que quieren abusar que no y luego me ponen hacer otras cosas y porque yo tengo que, yo me apuro a hacer el trabajo porque me tengo que ir y por eso no como y no almuerzo hasta la casa, digo y luego me ponen a que "ay me puedes mover esta

mazeta pa-ca o me puedes limpiar aqui lo de el perro?” Y yo, ay... No... Si, alli no pero pos esta bueno me estan pidiendo y lo hago pero es el mismo pago no se si me vayan a dar mas.

Ariadne: Extra?

Veronica: Si osea, ellos ven como se nos estan haciendo un favor.

Ariadne: Si, y usted cree que porque no lo ven como trabajo asi como en tienda o restaurante? Usted que piensa?

Veronica: Si porque fijese que la senora del martes una vez le comente que yo habia visto en un anuncio de periodico que el legal aid que a las personas que trabajan en casa este pos ellas ya podian empezar a pagar lo minimo. Entonces yo se lo comente a la senora y me dijo, “No puede ser. Como le van a dar derechos a unas personas que sin papeles?” Y le dije le voy a trear el periodico senora pa que mire (giggles) y le dije que debe ser por hora y lo que es y dice, “no” dice, “como van a darles mas privilegios y en ese caso oye pos porque no estudian?” Pos, si yo pudiera hubiera acabado de estudiar pero yo lamentablemente me embaraze muy chica y dije no no pude pero en serio le dije, yo vi en el periodico (giggles again) y dijo, “no no pos yo muy apenas te puedo dar 30 y mas no puedo y por mi digo que es mas que suficiente los 30 dolar.”

Ariadne: Si? Wow.

Veronica: Y le dije, no esta bien no mas le estaba haciendo comentario (laughs again).

Veronica: Yes, I like my job but they suddenly want to take advantage and no, and then they want me to complete other tasks and because I have to, I have to hurry up and do my job because I have to leave and that's why I don't eat and I don't eat breakfast until I get home and then they have me "oh, can you help me move this pot over here or can you clean the dog's mess?" And I'm like...No...Yes, it's okay and they're asking me to and I do it but it's for the same pay and I don't know if they'll pay more.

Ari: Extra?

Veronica: Yes, they act like they're doing us a favor.

Ariadne: Yes, do you think it's because they don't see it as other jobs like working in a store or restaurant? What do you think?

Veronica: Yes because I once told my Tuesday employer that I had seen a legal aid newspaper advertisement that announced that domestic workers were to be paid the minimum wage. I told her about it and she said, "That can't be. How can they give them rights if they don't have any papers?" I told her I was going to bring her the newspaper so she could see (giggles) and I told her the pay should be by the hour and she said "no, how can they give them privileges and in that case why don't they study?" Well yes, I would've finished my studies but unfortunately, I became pregnant at a very young age and I couldn't but seriously, I told her, "I saw it in the newspaper (giggles again) and she said, "No no well I can barely pay you \$30 and I can't pay any more and I think it's more than enough the \$30."

Ariadne: Really? Wow.

Veronica: Yes, that's not right. I was only making a comment (laughs again).

Veronica worries her employer keeps adding duties to her day without increasing the pay, and it has become a significant problem. Her employer pays her \$30 for the day but Veronica believes she completes a considerable amount of work for the pay she receives. Because this situation has become difficult and uncomfortable to manage, she found a new way to voice her stance on the divergence between work and pay for domestic workers.

During our interview, Veronica expressed her concerns of her employer making a number of disparaging comments about undocumented immigrants and border crossers because she is a Mexican immigrant herself. Veronica found a way to voice her concerns about being paid a low wage by referencing a local newspaper announcement proclaiming that domestic workers deserve the minimum hourly wage. A non-profit legal aid office paid the newspaper advertisement; the ad asked for domestic workers to visit the legal aid office to have their cases reviewed. Veronica decided to discuss the newspaper ad with her employer and even though she did not receive a pay increase, it was her way of affirming her disdain for the negative commentary. Her employer couldn't believe undocumented immigrants have rights and privileges and that a legal aid office was assisting them. Veronica later made it a point to show her employer the newspaper ad in order to see the information herself that some residents are fighting for undocumented immigrants and to show her that negative treatment towards domestic workers is not tolerated. Veronica did not receive a pay increase on that day or

afterwards, but her voice was heard. Though her strategy was indirect, Veronica made it a point to express her stance on the issue. Domestic workers incorporate strategic discursive practices as they negotiate adverse occupation conditions.

Like Veronica, Maria H. considers her occupation as the place “*que nos da de comer*”²¹ and its importance is evident. After living in Laredo, Texas for 10 years Maria H. tells me she is no longer scared. She affirms this with her focused eyes looking straight at me as her fist hits the arm of the rocking chair she sits in. “*Yo ya no tengo miedo,*” she proclaimed.

She and I met a month before our interview, and even though we had an interesting initial conversation that lasted for over an hour, Maria H. told me she would think about agreeing to an interview. She also wanted to ask her daughter if she thought it was a good idea. As I visited her home and sat on her porch that day, I noticed she kept looking out into the streets and quickly made eye contact with anyone who would pass by her house. We continued our conversation and at the end of our initial meeting, she told me she would contact me if she agreed to an interview. A month after our conversation took place, a family friend called to inform me that Maria H. agreed to the interview, but she was only available Saturdays and Sundays. I agreed to meet with her that Saturday, and as I walked up to the familiar porch, she greeted me with a smile. She kept thinking about our conversation in the past weeks and her daughter told her to do what she felt was right; she told her friend to call and arrange a time to meet with me.

²¹ Maria describes her occupation as a job that provide food on the table for her family.

I asked Maria H. why she agreed to the interview and she told me she wasn't afraid anymore and also wanted to help me with this research project. At 62, Maria H. is an undocumented live-in domestic worker from Oaxaca, Mexico. After her mother's death and her husband abandoning her, she took her friend's advice and made the move to Laredo. She considers her life back in Mexico vastly different than her life in Laredo. *"Bueno aya yo no trabajaba. Aca trabajo. Tengo que trabajar todos los dias. Si no no tengo. Yo no voy a tener dinero con que comer."* The substantial difference is that in Mexico she did not work outside of the home, yet in Laredo, if she doesn't work there is no money to purchase food to eat. She believes in hard work but confesses that people take advantage of domestic workers. Maria H. has been a live-in domestic worker for about five years. She takes care of an older woman from Monday morning to Saturday morning. Maria H. is in charge of the cooking, cleaning, and caring for any other need the older woman has. Her employer is the older woman's relative. They've had a positive relationship over the years, but there have also been occasions where they disagree. She understands the importance of protecting her job, but at times she has spoken up to voice her concerns.

An interesting detail is that like Norma and Veronica, Maria H. chooses an indirect yet compelling way to voice her concerns. Maria H. visited a health clinic and as she stated her concerns of medications being too expensive, the healthcare worker told her that domestic workers like Maria H. do not get paid enough money. The healthcare worker was forthright in her words and advised Maria her employer was not paying her what she should.

Pero es raro que yo le conteste porque la misma enfermera me dijo. Porque yo le dije, es que la señora dice que la medicina esta muy cara y ella dice si, es que su patrona tampoco le pagan lo que le deben de pagar. Ellas le pagan lo minimo. Y yo si se lo dije a mi patrona.

It's rare that I answer back because the same nurse told me. Because I told her, it's because my boss told me that the medicine is very expensive and she said yes, it's because your boss doesn't pay you what she should. They pay you the minimum. And yes, I did tell my boss.

Maria H. doesn't usually complain or voice her concerns to her employer, but in this case she relays the information raised by the healthcare. She voices her concerns in an indirect manner by way of disclosing the information the healthcare worker provided. The commentary expressed is not coming from Maria H. directly; she can be described as a conduit, but more importantly, she is using this moment as an opportunity to express her stance on the wage disparities among domestic workers.

Domestic workers believe it is important to voice their opinions and raise their concerns when they are treated unfairly or abused, yet it can create turmoil in the home. Many of my participants are inclined to seek indirect yet strategic approaches in order to express themselves while simultaneously protecting their jobs.

While I spoke to Sonia and Mari at one of the bus stops, Mari told me about a time her *patrona* asked her to clean the counters three times because they weren't up to her standards. At some point she was upset because the *patrona's* children had gone into the kitchen, and she had to clean the area once again. As she walked out of the home, her

patrona called her back into the home and told her she couldn't leave since her duties were incomplete. She cleaned the counters a third time and as she walked away one last time, she told her, "*Esto es lo mas limpio que va a estar. No se que decirle pero si no le gusta, va a tener que ocupar a una santa y a una esclava.*" Mari understood these were strong words by telling her employer it was never going to be cleaner than how she left the kitchen area. And if she were dissatisfied with her work again, she would have to hire a saint and a slave. Mari laughed as the words came out of her mouth suggesting she made these remarks in jest. She told her employer she was joking as she laughed but confessed there was some truth to her comments and perhaps her *patrona* would "get the hint" of what she put her through. Her *patrona* laughed alongside Mari and told her she had done a good job for the day. Mari returned the next and was surprised her employer apologized and mentioned to her she was unfair the day before. In this case, Mari employs humor and even laughter as an approach to express her position on exhaustive and unreasonable job duties. While articulating her stance is significant, she does it in a way that does not threaten her occupation. The use of humor and laughter is seen as a buffer to convey her message. Not only is she using humor, she is also employing a hedger by revealing to her employer she was only joking. It was important for Mari to express her concerns, and she negotiated a way to do so without compromising her job.

Reflection

Domestic workers enact distinct protection practices that enable them to safeguard their occupation. Particular protection strategies are employed as they navigate their way between two countries in an effort to reduce the threat of losing their

employment, being deported, or losing their U.S. crossing permit. According to the CBP's 2014 fiscal year, "illegal migration" apprehensions have increased, yet they have significantly declined since its 2000 peak. Of 479,371 southwest border apprehensions nationwide however, 332,457 apprehensions took place in Texas. This means that during the 2014 fiscal year, 69 percent of apprehensions took place along the Texas southwest border including the Nuevo Laredo-Laredo border. The CBP agency also released a 2014 fact sheet discussing the increase of child apprehensions along the South Texas border, which was met with an increase in CBP agents patrolling along the area ("U.S. Customs and Border Protection," 2014). An increase in CBP agent workforce is indicative of a more vigilant environment for domestic workers who can cross but cannot legally work in the U.S. and for undocumented domestic workers living and working in Laredo as well.

As Lorena confessed, at times she believes agents or "government workers" monitor different areas throughout the city. Even though there has not been material proof this takes place, domestic workers are watchful and at times apprehensive about their surroundings. As my participants described, domestic workers are observant of their environment because of the potential threat of deportation and losing their jobs. They themselves monitor their surroundings in an effort to reduce that same threat. These daily challenges generate decision-making strategies to ensure their crossing privileges are protected and their jobs are secure. Women are careful of their interactions with others as they travel to and from their work sites and especially as they cross into the U.S. At the same time, they are watchful of who walks next to them and at times

even who sits next to them on the bus and on the bus stop benches. These are distinct protection strategies to ease the equivocality they discern.

Domestic workers discursively protect their jobs by alleviating the interrogation process as they enter the U.S. by knowing their “story” well enough that CBP agents briefly questions them. Because crossing into the U.S. at an increased rate can cause CBP agents to question domestic workers even further, women purchase small items, and save old receipts as reasons or justifications to enter the U.S. Domestic workers are tactical in how and when they express their opinions and concerns during particular moments at work in ways that clarify their points of view yet done in a way where their job isn’t in jeopardy. My participants’ occupational identity is constructed and negotiated by being vigilant of their environment and seeking ways to protect their occupation. These said strategies are accomplished as they protect their present situation and create a possible future. Even though the challenges and strategies are difficult to navigate and accomplish, their purpose does not waver. Domestic workers are mindful of a promising future and more importantly they have a tenacious responsibility to their families.

CHAPTER IV

TENEMOS QUE SALIR ADELANTE:

FINDING MEANING IN DIRTY WORK

Domestic work usually goes unnoticed until it fails to get done. This is an occupation that is overlooked in organizational studies as well as the general population; however, as Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) argue, these jobs are “real” and so is the stigma attached to them. Social, emotional, and physical taint may seem to be affixed to the occupation, yet domestic workers find meaning in their work. Chapter Four continues to answer how Mexican immigrant domestic workers construct their occupational identity. The data analysis revealed that domestic workers negotiate the meaning of their occupation as they mediate through particular occupational constraints. Particularly, this chapter focuses on two meanings of work that help negotiate Mexican immigrant women domestic workers occupational identity: (1) pushing through the work and (2) dignity in dirty work. The first section of this chapter specifically focuses on how domestic workers working on the Laredo-Nuevo Laredo border continuously push through the dirty work by focusing on what is at stake: their livelihood.

Pushing Through the Work

In Nuevo Laredo, Isabel’s day begins at 5:00 a.m. and doesn’t end until 6:00 p.m.-7:00 p.m. She is working for her children from the moment she awakes. Isabel, a transnational domestic worker for four years, works because she doesn't have a choice. With three children living in Nuevo Laredo, she describes her 13-hour day as part of the

job, including the two hours of travel each way for six days a week. *“Todo lo que hago— todo lo que me arriesgo es para ellos, pero no es facil. No paro.”* Like many transnational workers, she can legally cross into the U.S., yet cannot work. This is what she refers to as the *arriesgos* or risks she faces every single day. She understands her occupation is not the best paid, but Isabel looks beyond the laborious work, treatment, and the risks she encounters while traveling to and from work because she recognizes that having this occupation is the only opportunity her children have to live a better life in Mexico. She describes herself as a *trabajadora*, a worker, and hates the names people use for her occupation and regardless of the occupational constraints, she is a *“trabajadora y aguantamos tanto porque tenemos que hacerlo. Esta dificil para aguantar tanto.”* In this particular context, *aguantar* is translated to English words like endure or tolerate, and at different points within the interviews and quick conversations at the city bus stops, domestic workers continuously discussed their experiences of *aguantar*. Whether it be the laborious efforts, the complicated relationship between employer and employee, or even the strenuous work to travel to and from work, *aguantar* is a constant but mostly coupled with perseverance.

Isabel recounted a time she felt mistreated by her employer. After working for her employer in one of the most affluent Laredo communities for three years, she remembered a time her employer invited her to a birthday party in her home. She confesses she was opposed to the idea because it was her only day off and she thought it would be strange, yet she didn’t want to disrespect her employer and accepted the

invitation. She described walking into the home feeling *extraña*²² and uncomfortable but managed to make the best of it and even appreciated the invitation. However, the invitation as a guest was short lived when her employer asked Isabel to work the party after her other *trabajadora* felt ill and would not attend. Even though her employer paid her twice as much, she was upset and disappointed. She described this incident as an insult; initially, she was not pleased to be there but accepted the invitation because she didn't want to disappoint her employer and after spending her own money to cross the bridge, she was asked to work.

Yo ni queria ir pero me senti mal y lo hice por ella para no quedar mal y asi me pago? Pero ni modo. Uno tiene que aguantar y hecharle ganas porque este es mi trabajo y por eso tengo lo que tengo para mis hijos. Nadamas para adelante, pero asi nos pagan ellas.

I didn't even want to go but I felt bad and I did it so I could stay in good terms with her and that is how she repays me? Well that's how it is. One has to endure and keep on giving it your all because this is my job and that is the reason I have what I have for my children. Just keep moving forward, but that is how they repay us.

The employer-employee relationship is complex and difficult to navigate because even though employees like Isabel believe they have formed a friendship or perhaps have become part of the employer's family, they are otherwise reminded of the contrary (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Romero, 2002; Romero, 2011). Isabel attempts to negotiate

²² Extraña is Spanish for strange or unfamiliar.

the meaning of her occupation and even though it is *extraño* to be at her job site as a guest rather than a worker, she is grateful for the gesture and recognizes her employer as being *buena*.²³ But this is not easy for Isabel because she is quickly reminded that she is an employee first and foremost, and regardless of the extra money, it is a difficult space to navigate. As Isabel recounts this incident, her friend Maria eagerly interjects and solidifies Isabel's point. "*Nosotras somos empleadas; eso esta muy claro!*" She asserts that the fact that they are workers is clear. She stresses that her mother clearly advised her she is "*la muchacha de la limpieza—eso métete en la cabeza.*" According to Maria's mother, it should be clear to Isabel and Maria that they are employees and not part of the family.

What is interesting is Isabel's willingness to discern what the occupation provides and at the same time recognizing the poor treatment by her employer. This tension of the positive and negative aspects of the occupation exists and is managed by underlining the importance of the job. She pushes through the treatment and is resolute in providing for her children. She is discursively negotiating between the negative and positive aspects of her occupation. In the end, she underlines the importance of persevering by *echándole ganas*²⁴ *al trabajo*. Regardless of the treatment or hard work, her children are first, and it is the construction of this work-related identity that provides a sense of meaningfulness.

²³ Buena is Spanish for good and fair.

²⁴ *Echándole ganas* is a common Spanish slang phrase used in several Latin American countries and especially in Mexico. This Spanish phrase is defined as putting the necessary effort and will to a given task or problem. It can also refer to the common American phrase of "keeping at it."

Poor treatment doesn't only come from the employers. My participants at times spoke positively about their employers yet had negative exchanges with other members of the family or even with employers' friends. Maria H. understands the complexities of being a domestic worker when friends or outside family members step into their worksite and want to declare orders. Even though she has a positive relationship with her employer, she had unfavorable exchanges with her employers' extended family and friends. Maria H. told me about a time her former employer's friend who lived in Indiana but was now in Laredo looking for work was disrespectful and called her a *gata*.²⁵

Maria H.: Una vez en una casa me decian gata asi en grito. Y la, no la que me contrato si no una que vino de Indiana, que venia de otra parte y venia ella porque no tenia trabajo. Y yo nadamas enfocada en el trabajo que la señora me dijo, la que me busco. Ella llegó con su marido y con dos muchachitos bien entrenaditos, los niños de ella. Y ya son como cuatro y queria que yo le lavara todo y como ellos no traian trabajo. Dice la senora—pues la muchacha—Ay pos voy hacer tacos, comida para vender a la construccion y me dejaba toda cosas de vasijas alli, y se las lavaba yo, se las lavaba yo, y un dia se fue a vender las cosas y yo estaba cuidando a unos niños porque la abuelita habia recojido a unos niños—no se. Y ya le dije es que yo ya le dije que yo no puedo lavar. Es que

²⁵ While the denotative meaning of the word *gata* is a female cat, this word is used in an offensive manner. I've heard this word before while listening to different conversations at home and in Mexican *telenovelas*. *Gata* means servant and it's a derogatory use of the term "maid." It is considered one of the worst names you can call a woman. I asked a few people (my early informant, my mother, and my sister-in-law who is from Mexico) and all three women said it is one of the worst names to call a woman. It means that you are beneath other people and not given your worth.

queria que yo tambien le lavara la ropa. Y le digo no puedo, no puedo. Dice, y yo por dentro lavando y dice, “Es que tu para eso eres mi gata. Tu eres mi gata. Eres una gata. Eres una gata aqui.” Cree me que alli si me dio tristeza. No no, y me volvi a regresar y le dije sabe que? Usted no me contrato. A mi me contrato la senora y sabe que? Aqui están sus trastes y yo no soy gata ni un minuto mas me quedo. Y me salí asi como una casa asi como de enseguida y le dije señora no me presta su telefono? Y le hable a mi patrona y dije tu tienes ese problema con ella—y yo le dije es verdad, tal vez soy su gata pero que no me trate asi. Y la señora me dijo, No pues yo ahorita voy hablar con ella y nunca vino. Y entre y dijo, “No yo ya me voy y yo no quiero saber nada y no me pagen si no quieren, no me pagen nada. Y ya luego este, yo creo que le hablo a su hija y le dijo que me trajiera ella y me volvi a salir a que me preste el telefono. Y me dijo le señora, tu no le hables a nadie mas pero a la policia. O ve y dile a la muchacha que le vas a hablar a la policia. Y dijo, yo te puedo llevar y le dije, le voy a hablar a un policia si haber si me puede llevar. Y me va preguntar porque yo le voy a decir porque. Ella me esta molestando y yo no. Y no debo te llevar esos tratos porque este negocio es con usted y si, no vino el policia pero al ratito me vino a dejar y cambio su actitud. Inmediatamente me dijo, no no no ahorita te voy a llevar. Ahorita te voy a llevar.

Ariadne: En ese momento, que se sintio decirle, mira yo hasta aqui y ya?

Maria H.: Cuando me estaba diciendo gata... que ya me tenia como, si me hubiera decido gata y se va no hubiera sentido nada, pero alli cuando me dijo

asi, me dio como tristeza. Que tengo que estar yo asi? Aunque le lave yo los trastes o la traten a uno mal pero ya cuando vine para aca cambia de paracer y se calmaron mis nervios y me volvi a quedar. Pero asi dije, es verdad que nos dan de comer y todo pero uno viene a ayudar. No.

Maria H.: There was one time in a home they would call me *gata*. It wasn't my employer but a woman from Indiana that was coming from another area because she didn't have a job. I was focused on my work that my employer had left for me. That other woman arrived with her husband and two little children and they were well trained. There were four of them and she wanted me to wash their clothes and everything they would bring from work. The woman, well the young girl would say, "I'm going to make tacos and food to sell at the construction site" and she would leave her dishes there, and I would wash them, I would wash them, and one day she left to sell her food and I was taking care of the children because the grandma had picked up some of them, I don't know. And I told her I couldn't wash. And it's because she wanted me to wash their clothes too. And I told her I couldn't, I couldn't. She said, and I was inside washing, and she said, "It's because that is why you are here, you are my *gata*. You are my *gata*. You are a *gata*. Here, you are a *gata*." Believe me when I say that it caused me to feel sadness. No, no, I returned to where she was and I said, "You know what? You didn't hire me. The other lady hired me and you know what? Here are your dishes and I am not a *gata* one more minute and I will not stay." And I went outside to like a house here next door, and I asked to borrow the telephone and I

called my employer and told her about the problem I had with her. And I told her, it's true, I may be your *gata* but she cannot treat me this way. And my employer said, "Well, no I'll talk to her" but she never came. And went back into the house and said, "I'm leaving and I don't want to know anything and don't pay me if you don't want to, don't pay me anything. And then my employer I guess called her daughter and told her to call her and I went outside again and asked to borrow the telephone. And she said not to call anyone but the police. She said to tell the girl that I was calling the police and that she could take me and I told her I'm going to call the police and they're going to ask and I'm going to tell them why. She's bothering me and I am not. I shouldn't be treated that way because this business arrangement is with you. The police didn't go but a while later she did arrive and her attitude changed. She immediately told me that she would take me. She told me that she was going to take me.

Ariadne: In that moment, what did it feel like to tell her you had had enough?

Maria H. When she called me *gata*? That she had me...if she would have said *gata* and left I wouldn't have felt anything but in the moment she said it, I felt like sadness. Why do I have to put up with it? Even if I wash the dishes or the treat me poorly but when I arrived over here I changed the way I saw things and my nerves were calmed and I chose to stay. But I did say, it's true that they feed us and everything, but we only try to help. No.

Maria H. became increasingly upset as she recounted this story. She didn't quite understand why the poor treatment took place, but she also knew she couldn't leave the

job. Necessity kept her at that job. She returned but not before she gave them a piece of her mind. Maria H. explained that necessity is what keeps she and other domestic workers working under those conditions. She changed her outlook and returned to her job and during our conversation she told me she stayed because it's a job and because of her necessity to earn money. "*Es todo lo que es, nadamas. Yo necesito dinero y es lo que tengo que hacer.*" It's what she has to do in order to help her family. The poor treatment is recognized, yet it is what needs to be done in order to push ahead.

Living and working on the Texas-Mexico border is not an easy feat, especially when workers face multiple occupational constraints. Examples of such constraints include but are not limited to deportation risk and threats, walking long distances to and from work, additional work without pay, the complexity of the employer-employee relationship, and not having a set schedule for a day's work. These occupational constraints make the job even more strenuous. What is interesting about living and working across national borders is that domestic workers are maneuvering between two countries—different laws, currency, at times a different language, differing bus schedules and strategizing on the most opportune time to cross the bridge in order to avoid the long lines. These workers are concerned with time, but most importantly they are apprehensive about crossing into a country where most cannot legally obtain employment.

Whether women cross the bridge from Nuevo Laredo to Laredo on a daily basis or if they reside in Laredo, the majority of domestic workers utilize the city's bus system—unless they have their own vehicle, carpool with other domestic workers, or are

live-in domestic workers. However, I would come to find that these are exceptions rather than the rule. Under the hot sun most domestic workers arrive to work on foot after walking several city blocks to about a mile, depending on their bus stop. There were several occasions, however, where employers picked up and/or dropped off domestic workers at the nearest bus stop in their neighborhood and sometimes, even to the downtown bridge or to their homes, if they resided in Laredo. However, these occurrences were exceptions.

At 37, Veronica, a single mother of five discusses the morning routine of leaving her home at 7:15 a.m. and arriving to work after 9 a.m. and says she walks about 20 city blocks since the city bus does not enter many of the affluent Laredo communities that hire domestic workers. Most of the neighborhoods and communities where domestic workers are employed are surrounded by long winding roads where you are only able to catch a glimpse of shade by walking under several large trees. No matter the temperature or weather conditions, they make the trek early in the morning and by 10:00 a.m., the streets of north Laredo are back to normal: quiet and alone. However, beginning at 2 p.m., the streets start filling with domestic workers walking back to the bus stop to begin their journey back home.

At times, Veronica has her own transportation but because her vehicle is unreliable, there are occasions she utilizes the city bus system to and from work. Since she has children in elementary school, she has to be strategic with her time in order to be out of work by the time her children are out of school. Because time is crucial, she rarely eats during the day.

Si, uno luego llega acarreada porque tengo que llegar a la casa y no tomo tiempo para comer ni para almorzar, no mas hasta que llego a mi casa, yo como. Si porque si tomo esas pausas, nunca acabo. No acabo y tengo que terminar las casas porque yo tengo que venir pos por mis niñas.

If I arrive in a rush it is because I have to get to the house so I do not take the time to eat or have breakfast, only after I arrive at my house is when I eat. If I take the time to have breaks, then I will never finish. I have to finish all the houses because I have to go for my girls.

Veronica understands that in order to arrive on time to pick up her children she cannot take a break from work, even it that means eating until she arrives back home. She pushes through the work, saying that it is all part of the job—“*tengo que aguantar para salir adelante!*” She has to endure and tolerate her work conditions in order to progress and succeed. For Veronica, being an undocumented single mother adds to the occupational constraints and the limitations of voicing her opinion when the job overwhelms her physically and emotionally. Even though she has lived in Laredo most of her life, she is undocumented and limited in her occupational options. Veronica has been married for 20 years but is currently separated. She married a *machista*²⁶ who refused to let her work until there was no other economic alternative, and because she was a housewife for over 20 years, obtaining a job as a domestic worker made sense to her. To make matters worse, she explains that her husband never began the immigration process because he believed she only married him to gain citizenship. Concerned by the

²⁶ Machista is Spanish for male chauvinist.

multiple occupational constraints, she attempts to overcome the negativity and complexity of her present situation at home by focusing on the positive aspects of her job. Veronica recognizes the necessity of obtaining a job with health insurance but because of her citizenship status, it is an unrealistic expectation.

Si yo hubiera podido como agarrar otro trabajo que me ofreciera unas cosas como aseguranza porque yo se que de rato yo voy estar enfermandome. Porque a veces llueve y como quiera tengo que agarrar el bus lloviendo o en el frio, osea y pos no, yo me enfermo y aun enferma, me e ido al trabajo porque siento que hijole no me van a pagar el dia. No me lo van a pagar y lo necesito. Osea, me hago de fuerzas y digo no no puedo faltar, tengo que ir. Porque trato de hacer dos casas al dia y ay vaces que es imposible por mis niñas. Si pero este, si you pienso mucho en ellas porque yo tengo que hacer dinero para que ellas tengan donde vivir.

If I would have been able to get another job that offered other things like insurance because know that after time I might be getting sick. At times it rains and I still have to grab the bus raining or when it's cold and even though I am sick I have to go to work because they will not pay me the day. They will not pay and I need it. So, I make myself strong and I tell myself that I cannot miss and I have to go. I try to finish two houses a day and there are times it is impossible to go for my girls. Yes, I do think about them a lot because I have to make money so they will have somewhere to live.

Her occupation as a domestic worker is more than merely a job to her—it is the livelihood for she and her children, and to Veronica, placing emphasis to that assertion is important. At the forefront, the meaning of her job takes shape through the understanding that her children's needs come before hers and that she must have a sense of tirelessness and commitment in order to come through for her children. This positive occupational identity is at the forefront and before the negativity, ill treatment, and extraneous workload.

When discussing the importance of pushing through the work or as Cecilia, a domestic worker who has worked in Laredo for over 25 years, puts it, “*darle duro al trabajo*,” she admits it has not been easy. She clearly remembers her worst experience as a domestic worker and explains how she “survived” three months of malnutrition. She once worked for a woman who paid her to cook and clean for her elderly father. However, she wasn't allowed to eat the food she cooked or utilize the stove or refrigerator to cook her own food or keep her food cold and fresh. As a result, Cecilia ate cheese wrapped in a *tortilla* five days a week. She thought it was the only way to eat food that was small, not noticeable and yet filling. After repeating this routine five days a week for three months, Cecilia fell ill and decided to leave the job. It was a difficult decision, but she couldn't continue working under those conditions and after arriving to her hometown of Anahuac, Tamaulipas Mexico, she fell ill for one month. She was fatigued and could not break her fever. She lost more than one month of work. According to Cecilia, this is what had to be done due to an economic crisis in her family.

En mi casa teníamos una crisis económica muy fuerte así que lo poquito que ganaba yo, pues ni modo en dejarlo. Si me entiendes? Por eso lo aguante. Y si, aguante lo mas posible. Y pos la señora no se metia con nosotros nadamas que no nos dejaba comer pero tampoco no se metia en muchos cosas entonces para mi fue facil arreglarlo, con queso. Y no quiere que comamos, no comemos. Para mi se me hizo mas facil comprar queso y comermelo. Ibamos a la tienda y comprabamos queso porque no podiamos calentar nada. Namas podiamos usar la cocina. Si, y aunque sobrara, no nos daba chanza de comer a nosotros. Si. No nos dejaba salir. Si estabas en tu hora de trabajo, no podias salir. Y alli estabamos las 24 horas. Por la necesidad.

At my house we had a very difficult financial crisis and the little that I earned, well I had to send it. You know what I am saying? That is why I did it and I did it for as long as I could. So the lady would not interfere with us except we could not eat but she would not interfere with any of our things so for me it was an easy fix, with cheese. She doesn't want us to eat, so we will not eat. For me it was easy to buy some cheese and eat it. We would go to the store to buy cheese because we were not allowed to heat anything. We could only use the kitchen. Even though there were leftovers were not allowed to eat. And she would not let us out. If you were on-duty you could not leave. Because of necessity we were there the 24 hours.

Cecilia's decision to eat cheese and tortillas was easy. She fails to describe her employer as being difficult since she would not interfere in Cecilia's work, yet she and other

domestic workers working in the same home could not eat the food they cooked for the employer, cook their own food, refrigerate their own food, or leave the home to purchase food. Necessity is what kept her in that job and even though she has not forgotten her experience, she is satisfied knowing she was able to send the money back to her family in Mexico.

This need to push through the work is tied to necessity and sacrifice for many domestic workers. The necessity to work in order to move the family forward and have economic vitality and upward mobility is tied to the sacrifices these women make in order to shift their family, especially their children and parents into a better economic standpoint.

At 59 years old, Lupita has worked as a domestic worker for over 35 years and even though she is now in a much better financial position, the need to work for her children and husband kept her from quitting jobs that were less than desirable. Interestingly, there is shift that takes place for Lupita. On the foreground, she never loses sight of why she is there—she doesn't dwell on the social and physical taint of the work. She clearly indicates and describes the “dirty” work, and then focuses on the importance of family.

Yo tenia que hacer muchas cosas. Muchas cosas que tenia que hacer pero lo hize, me quede porque tenia que. La patrona me decia cosas y el trabajo era mucho para mi por lo que me daba. Tuve que pensar, bueno como me decia usted de los sacrificios. Yo tenia que pensar en los ninos y la necesidad en mi

casa, o con mi marido. Por el trabajo y el porque antes que nada, ni el dinero porque era poco. Y me quede, si.

I had to do a lot of things. There were many things that I had to do and I did them. My boss would tell things and the work was too much for what she would pay me. I had to stop and think and well like you said about making sacrifices. I had to think about my children, the necessities at home, and my husband.

Lupita makes that necessary shift—she discusses the reality to allow mistreatment and demanding and rigorous work; however, this same realization allows her to adjust her focus from the arduous work and ill treatment to the outcome of that same job: upward mobility for her children and ending her economic hardships. Even though the money was not comparable to the work, she stayed. Lupita understood that her job is her livelihood and even though she does not make enough money, the decision to ultimately stay in that job is tied to necessity. For Lupita, that is ample reason to focus on the outcome of her labor rather than only on the treatment and strenuous work.

Similarly, Cecilia pushes through the work despite the sacrifices she has made. Even though she is a live-in domestic worker who is treated with respect and dignity, she understands her job provides medical care and access for her family living in Mexico, but it comes at a price. She was unable to care for or visit her father as he was dying in Mexico.

Yo nadamas de pensar que cuando mi papá murio, que cuando mi papá fallecio, yo no pude estar con el. En todas las experiencias en cuidar señores, asi como yo e servido, yo no pude tener asi a mi papá. Mi papá me necesito y asi con mi

experiencia de cuidar enfermos mi papa duro mucho tiempo en cama. Pero el consuelo de mi mama que me dava, porque yo sufri mucho con eso, fue que si no fuera sido por mi, mi papá no estuviera muy bien atendido. Yo no estuve alli para darle la medicina, no estuve alli para bañarlo, pero si estuve alli para comprarle le medicina que mi papá necesitaba. Si, y es lo que me decia mi mamá, “No mijita, usted no estuvo aqui para cuidarlo pero si estuvo aqui para eso.” Porque si no mi papá hubiera tenido quien lo cuidara, como tuvo a mis hermanas, pero no hubiera tenido para cuidar o comprar la cremas, comprar la medicina y todo eso, venia de mi. Tarde para que me entrara eso, pero ya si entendi. Yo queria estar con el pero no se pudo.

Only to think that when my father died, I was not able to be with him. Of all my experiences of taking care of elderly men I was not able to take care of my father the same way. My father needed me for a long just like the elderly men that I cared for. My mother would console me by telling me that if it wasn't for me, my father would not be well taken care of. I was not there to give him his medicine nor to bathe him, but I was there with the resources to purchase the medicines that he needed. Yes, and my mom would tell me, “No my child, you weren't there to care for him physically but you were there for these other resources.” And yes, my father would have had me to care for him physically, like my sisters, but he wouldn't have had the resources to purchase the crèmes and medicines he needed and all of that. That came from me. It took some time for me to finally understand that. I wanted to be with him but it wasn't possible.

Cecilia could not be with her family when he passed away. It took her time to understand that even though she was unable to be in Mexico when he fell ill and when he died, her job as a domestic worker provided his entire medical care. She cried as she explained the complexities of her job. On the one hand, she was relieved her job allowed for prompt health access and medical care for her father, but because she had to work, she could not spend the last months of her father's life in Mexico with he and the family. With her mother's help, she continuously attempts to remind herself of the positive aspects her job brings, even though she may not always see it that way.

Eager to help her family, Araceli has lived in Laredo for a year and for the past eight months, she works six days a week and for three different families. At 19, she is undocumented, young, and clearly understands the reality of hardship. She is the youngest of 11 children and recently married and though most of her family remains in Veracruz, Mexico, they rely on her to send money to Veracruz. Araceli is quiet, soft spoken, and rarely looks up when speaking, but that should not be confused with a lack of assertiveness. Once she and I established a good rapport, she was forthright during our conversations and insistent on discussing her experiences. Araceli is the youngest of my participants and agreed to the interview because of a common acquaintance. She and I spent time in one of her employer's home. She assured me she had obtained permission from her employer and as I arrived to the home, her employer left to the neighbor's house in order for Araceli and I to be comfortable. She confessed she does not enjoy her occupation—being a domestic worker was not in her life's master plan. She was a year away from completing her business degree in Mexico, but because the family's financial

problems quickly escalated, she interrupted life as she knew it in Mexico to find a better job in Laredo, Texas. She made the trip by bus until she reached the Nuevo Laredo border to Laredo, but when I asked how she managed to cross into the country, she looked down and nodded. It was her way of telling me to move on to another question. I remember going through the interview transcript and having this overwhelming dolefulness overcome me. I thought about the multiple times Araceli reminded me of her young age, as if she found it necessary to convince me, and perhaps herself, she was 19. She assured me of her young age one last time before she walked away, and it was then she finally confessed her body felt four or five times older than her biological age.

Araceli described the substantial amount of work she undertook in each home. She characterized her job as exhausting and to make matters worse, she objected to the realization of arriving to her home and repeatedly fulfilling the exact job tasks once more. The double burden of managing a workload outside the home coupled with unpaid domestic labor inside the home is ubiquitous on the border and throughout the United States. Today, women are spending more time working outside the home, yet according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), 49 percent of women are performing household duties in their homes whereas 20 percent of men will do the same. Like Araceli, most of my participants expressed the ever-consuming realization of the second shift (Hochschild, 1989) not only from a physical standpoint but from a creative standpoint as well. With the exception of one participant, domestic workers explicitly expressed the physical exhaustion and strain as they described the laborious demands of the job and explained the literal and figurative lengths they undertake in order to

accomplish their job. At the same time, they explained the continuous responsibility of the second shift.

Socorro, a domestic worker working and living in Laredo for more than three years, described her paid labor and unpaid labor as a continuous cycle where the two are linked. She explained this continuous cycle as an *enlace* that underlines the complex interconnectedness of paid and unpaid domestic work. Socorro discusses the difficulty of the two being *enlazados* because the job tasks are nearly identical and they are usually accomplished consecutively.

Numerous domestic workers were adamant about the monotony of their occupation as well. Their bodies fatigued and the vigor and vitality they once had becomes nonexistent because as Araceli described it, doing this job is like repeating it over and over again. The difficulties of cleaning, cooking, and caring in her own home and then walking into her employers' homes and repeating the same job tasks is cumbersome. "*Hago este trabajo doble o triple todos los dias!*" Similarly, as Veronica and I were about to conclude our interview, I offered my gratitude and entered in a new conversation where she expressed her disappointment about people having a lack of appreciation and awareness of the work domestic workers undertake. Here, she affirmed that the job is actually accomplished twice: once for pay outside the home and once for the unpaid domestic labor accomplished inside her own home.

Hacemos el doble oiga. Porque tenemos que seguirle en la casa y tambien a cuidar los niños. Los grandes me ayudan pero como quiera tengo que estar al pendiente de ellos...ya me vengo acostando como a la una de la mañana y

cuando los niños van a la escuela que la tarea que tener que andar a las carreras porque la maestra tiene conferencias conmigo o la niña, metete a bañar o tengo que lavar el uniforme o quedarme en vela cuando se me enferman y digo yo no se pero ni me lo valoran. Las señoras donde yo voy no lo valoran.

We do this job twice. Because have to continue with the housework at home. My oldest children help out but I still have to be on top of everything. I end up going to be bed around 1a.m. So we end up are running around when my children have school because they have homework, they need to take a bath, or they may need a school uniform washed or I have to stay up all night when they get sick and I don't know but they don't value all of the work I do. The ladies don't value the work I do either.

There is certainly a tone of fatigue and monotony of repeating the same job tasks a paid domestic worker undertakes, yet it is also necessary to recognize the emotional burden the job produces.

Similarly, Araceli understands the reality of her family's financial standpoint and realizes she is the only one who is able to turn things around for her family back home. During the most exhausting parts of her day, she thinks about her mother and wonders exactly how her mother's life has changed now that she has the financial backing of her daughter. She is constantly reminding herself of the benefits of her occupation, the financial freedom, and the hope to return one day to her mother. She mostly does this as she sweeps floors and often thinks about what her mother is doing at that exact moment. She describes these moments and admits it has been difficult, and I can tell how

strenuous it is as she wipes tears from her eyes and lowers her head. And then there is a hearty yet nervous giggle followed by a request to move on to the next question, but not before sighing and confessing this is the only way to get through these moments. There is an interesting shift that takes place as she is telling me about her mother. Araceli realizes the negative aspects of her job even admitting she would attempt to find another if she could legally work in the U.S. She'd prefer working for a restaurant or retail store because of the set hours and duties, but most of those jobs, she explains, require "legal papers." For now, being a domestic worker is what not only provides for her family in Laredo but is also enough to provide for her entire family on the other side of the border.

The negotiation between the exhaustion of her occupation fused with her long hours, monotonous routine, and at the same time being cognizant that she is her family's lifeline to financial sustainability and progress is ongoing. The meaning of work for Araceli surpasses the understanding that a worker's occupational identity is "constituted at work" (Ashcraft, 2013; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Of course, her occupational identity is constructed and negotiated through different occupational possibilities that may relate to the workplace; however as Araceli's experience demonstrates, it certainly transcends and overlaps to other locations. As with Veronica and Araceli as well as most of my participants, these other locations usually relate back to the family's financial and relational circumstances as well as the emotional and physical strain of the actual work. Together, these said influences impact the work that is accomplished in the workplace.

Dignity in Dirty Work

The first section of this chapter revealed that domestic workers' occupational identity is constructed in and outside the workplace. They negotiate their occupational identity by pushing through the physical strain and emotional burden of the occupation and shift their occupational position as one that endures and sacrifices for the betterment of their extended families and themselves. Even though they experience emotional exhaustion and a heavy workload, domestic workers' occupational identity is constructed beyond the workplace and the work itself. Occupational formations specifically related to domestic workers' gender, familial structure, and their families' varying economic standpoints construct the meaning of the occupation.

The second section of this chapter seeks to describe participants' lived experiences as they navigate work and life on the border. Specifically, the data revealed that Mexican immigrant women domestic workers working and living on the Texas-Mexico border find dignity in their occupation. Domestic workers construct a positive occupational identity that encourages them to push through and move beyond the physical and emotional taint of dirty work.

After spending several months on the city bus stops I met Lourdes, a Mexican immigrant from Nuevo Laredo who has worked for the same four families for over six years. Lourdes was one of the first domestic workers to begin a conversation with me. After spending more than two months in the field, I realized this was going to be more complicated and complex than imagined. I tried making conversation with several women, but no one spoke to me. They were cordial and said hello but no one expanded

on my attempts to a conversation. I understood they were busy women who were on the go and had little time to socialize. In fact, many domestic workers utilized their cell phones while on the bus in order to make plans and confirm appointments, while other women took quick naps before the bus arrived to their destination or back to the downtown bus station in order to begin their trek to Nuevo Laredo. Others used the time to catch up with acquaintances and friends. I realized it was *their* time and the last person they would pay attention to was me. At the same time however, several women refused to speak to me in fear of being caught working *sin papeles*.²⁷ The majority of transnational workers in Laredo can legally cross between Mexico and the U.S. but cannot work. With the exception of the women who legally work in Laredo, all of the participants clearly explained how they had too much to lose. On one occasion, the woman's nonverbal behavior was deafening. After spending the morning riding two particular routes to and from the bus station, I exited the bus and noticed a worker I had seen for at least two weeks. She arrived early on that particular morning and was eating what seemed to be a Burger King breakfast taco. I stood next to her and we both smiled. I began a conversation and when she realized who I was and my intention to recruit her as a participant, she stopped talking. She nodded her head and used her index finger to reinforce "no." She minimized all ambiguity with her nonverbal behavior. I told her I understood but I didn't move because we were both in line to catch the next bus. She decided to lose her spot and go to the end of the line. I didn't feel right. I asked the

²⁷ *Sin papeles* is a Spanish colloquial phrase often referencing a person who is undocumented or who is either crossing the border or living in the U.S. but not able to legally seek employment. The direct translation is "without papers."

women behind me to hold my spot and I quickly followed the woman and explained it was never my intention to make her feel uncomfortable and that I would go to the end of the line so that she'd return to her spot. She smiled, turned away, and quickly walked over to where we were at the front of the line. I saw that woman many times and we always smiled at one another but never said a word.

Many women explained they could not jeopardize their job. I believe news traveled to several women about a *muchacha*²⁸ walking around the bus station and bus stops asking for interviews. Several women admitted some of their friends had cautioned them about me. Some chose to speak to me but most did not. On several occasions, it took one worker to talk to me and after realizing I had absolutely no ill intentions, others followed. This is what took place when I met Lourdes.

Lourdes sat next to me on the bus, and we spoke about the hot weather and my job at the local university. I was wearing a university t-shirt, and it drew her attention. Our conversations were in 15-30 minutes increments since they usually took place at the bus stop, on the bus, or walking to bridge one after her workday ended. Lourdes, a 29-year old domestic worker aspired to be a teacher since she was a little girl but realized it was merely a dream. Most of her family works in Laredo, Texas and like her mother Lourdes is a transnational domestic worker who utilizes the city bus on both sides of the border for daily transportation. She considers herself lucky because most of her friends do not make their own money and cannot help their families. She grew up differently than most of her friends and the substantial difference was her mother. "*Mi mamá es lo*

²⁸ *Muchacha* is Spanish for girl or young lady.

maximo y ella me dijo que yo tenía que ver por mi misma—nadie mas lo iba hacer. Esto fue muy importante para mi porque cambio me punte de vista. Yo empeze a hecharle ganas a la escuela pero no pude seguirle porque necesitaba que ayudarle a mi mamá.”

Lourdes confesses that even though her mother taught her to take care of herself first she left school when she was 15 years old to help her family. It was a difficult decision but she regrets nothing. Since dropping out of high school, the work sites and conditions have changed but not her occupation. Fourteen years of domestic work changes you and according to Lourdes, it can teach substantial lessons as well.

Lourdes worked in Nuevo Laredo for about four years before moving to Laredo to work as a live-in domestic worker. She received between \$150-\$200 weekly and confesses it wasn't nearly enough for the duties she completed. She didn't worry about bills or money for food since the family provided a bedroom, food, and toiletries, but it was difficult learning when to say no to certain duties. Live-in domestic workers have previously detailed the complexity of the job since it is unclear when a worker is off the proverbial clock (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007 & Romero, 2002; Romero, 2011). Work and life are not demarcated for live-in domestic workers. At times it seems they are interlocked and can be quite complex, especially when an employer does not follow a routine, schedule, or a set of rules. Taking care of children can create further animosity and employer-employee divisiveness. Lourdes remembers that her employer's children would rarely sleep in their own beds since they wanted to sleep in hers. She didn't know how to say no and was afraid of losing her job if she contested to any duty or job task.

Es muy difícil de poner un hasta aquí, verdad? Yo nunca pude decir que no pero mi patrona no era abusiva pero que consansio! Yo me enamore de los niños y ellos también pero si estuvo difícil para darle entender que yo también tenía que descansar. Trabajando en casa es difícil porque ellos creen que porque estoy allí todo el tiempo, ellos pueden ir y venir. El trabajo nunca se acaba pero es difícil decir que no puedes o no quieres porque te están pagando pero ni es mucho. Yo nunca pude decirle a ella que no podía. Yo digo que se gana la lotería esos años conmigo.

It's very difficult to set limits, right? I could never say no but my employer wasn't abusive but how exhausting! I fell in love with the children and they did too but yes it was difficult to understand that I had to rest too. Working in the home is difficult because they think that because you are there all of the time, they can come and go. The work never ends but it's difficult to say I can't or I don't want to because they are paying you. But it's not that much. I could never tell her no. I think she won the lottery those years I worked there.

According to Lourdes, an effective worker is one who understands the importance of keeping the employer satisfied; more importantly however, Lourdes believes that an effective worker has a sense of achievement in the work that is accomplished. Even though the work is arduous and the hours and days are long, Lourdes constructs a sense of achievement and pride in the work. This understanding of achievement emanates from the particular technique and process of the actual work.

Lourdes: Tienes que tener dignidad en el trabajo, si? El trabajo es tuyo y tu puedes mandar en tu propia vida. Yo digo que el trabajo es duro, muy duro a veces pero yo aprendi que debo de tener una poca de dignidad en lo que hago. Ay, le digo a mi mamá, a mi me gusta lo que yo hago. Mi oficio es limpieza de casa pero a mi no me importa porque es mi trabajo y yo estoy orgullosa de lo que hago y luego como lo hago, si? Mucha gente, asi come mi mamá dicen que hacer limpieza es lo peor pero sabe que? Lo peor es ser floja, lo peor es no trabajar, lo peor es que te digan como lo hagas muchas veces, asi como me dijo de la otra muchacha. No, es que tienes que empujarte y decir, “Yo voy a salir de esto y lo voy hacer bien.”

Ariadne: Y de que viene eso?

Lourdes: De donde viene? Del corazon, si? Del corazon. De ser buena empleada. Tu tienes que ver por ti misma y decir que voy hacer todo lo posible para que me salga todo bien proque luego llegas del trabajo y te sientas y dices, ‘que dia tan bueno. Trabaje mucho y le heche ganas para hacerlo bien.’ No hay nada mejor que eso. Yo le dije a mi mamá que para mi se me hace mas facil el trabajo asi. Esta dificil el trabajo? Si. Pero tenemos que tener una poquita de dignidad en nuestro trabajo. No importa lo que es. No me gusta pensar en lo malo y entonces yo pongo a mi mente a trabajar en lo que puedo hacer.

Lourdes: You have to have dignity in your job, right? The job is yours and you can manage your own life. The work is tough but I have learned that you should have dignity in what you do. I tell my mother that I like what I do. My work is

cleaning homes but I do not care because it is my job and I am proud of what I do and how I do it, right? Many people including my mother say that cleaning houses is the worst, but you know what? The worst is being lazy and not working. The worst is someone to continuously telling you how to do your work. As another person told me, “you have to push forward and tell yourself that I am going to get out of this.”

Ariadne: From where does this attitude come from?

Lourdes: From where does it come from? It comes from the heart, from wanting to be a good worker. You have to look out for yourself and tell yourself that you are going to do everything possible for all to turn out well. I told my mother that for me the work is easy. Is it difficult? Yes. But we have to have dignity in the work that we do. It does not matter what it is. I do not like to think of what is bad so I occupy myself in what I can do to make it better.

For Lourdes, dignity in the work is clearly the foremost important characteristics of a good worker and is necessary to produce value and worth. Lourdes understands domestic work is tough work (*duro*) and because of those demanding and laborious facets, workers find meaning in what they do in order to push forward. To Lourdes, it's more than merely a job—it is an opportunity to demonstrate the value of hard work. This particular occupation is surrounded by stigma, yet domestic workers are constantly finding ways to further themselves from it and embrace the occupation with a constructive and positive outlook. Finding meaning in their work also stems from the quality of work they produce. Lourdes finds meaning in her work by drawing attention

to how it is accomplished. And according to Lourdes, it comes from the heart and being a good worker. She is aware of the stigma domestic work carries and is constantly communicated and reinforced as substandard. This reminder derives from her employer, society, and even her mother who believes this type of work is the worst of its kind. For Lourdes, producing quality work and accomplishing her job duties with sincere effort and particular inclination is what makes *una empleada buena*²⁹.

Similarly, Amalia describes a good worker as one who keeps the employer happy. She enjoys her job and wouldn't change it if she had the opportunity. Amalia, an undocumented worker lives and works in Laredo, works as a domestic worker for an elderly woman. She wants to keep her employer happy, whether she bathes her, cleans the home, engages in conversations with her, and even does her hair and nails, Amalia is pleased knowing that her employer is happy. Amalia believes there is nothing better than doing good work and suggests that some workers arrive to the worksite and choose to ignore their job tasks. This is especially true for domestic workers employed by older employers. Amalia affirms that a bad worker is someone who says, "*No, ahorita y se van y no hacen nada o a veces les agarran cosas que no deben de la señora. A mi no, ellas nunca se han quejado de mi porque yo como quiera encuentro algo y digo, 'A mira, dejó esto aquí.'*" Amalia has pride in her work and even though she believes some domestic workers take advantage of their elder employers, she is satisfied knowing that if she finds an item or even money while she's cleaning, she readily returns it. *Confianza*³⁰ is

²⁹ Spanish for a good worker.

³⁰ Spanish for trust

what sustains this employer-employee relationship. She understands this job provides necessary income but feels happy and is satisfied in helping her elderly employers.

Being a good worker is also important for Blanca, a Mexican immigrant who has lived in Laredo, Texas for over two years. Blanca lived in Nuevo Laredo most of her life and after marrying a Laredoan, the immigration process became less challenging. She and Lourdes met on Route 16 traveling to the north side of Laredo. Their friendship began after sitting next to each other on their way back from work. They've been friends for several years now and often remind each other of how different and much more difficult their lives were before working as domestic workers in Laredo. Like all of the participants, Blanca began as a domestic worker out of necessity and confesses she was not very good at her job. *“No! Este trabajo no me gustaba—ay para nada? Yo le decía a mi familia que esto no era para siempre porque me queria casar, tener un bebe y luego ponerme a trabajar en tienda o en el correo donde trabaja una gente mia. Pero necesitaba dinero y aqui me tienes. Y si, como no me gustaba no me importaba y lo hacia todo doble a veces.”* Because this was temporary and not her sought after job she was never serious about the work. Without a high school diploma, Blanca quickly realized domestic work gave her an opportunity for economic survival and work autonomy. Even though the first years were difficult, she understood that by being a hard worker, employers would pay her more and she would obtain positive recommendations for better jobs. After working for some time, Blanca noticed a change in the treatment she received from her employers and felt accomplished and happy. She began to take her work seriously and the patronas gave her more responsibilities and money. *“Yo tuve que*

tomarlo en serio y desde alli cambia mi modo de trabajar y luego las patronas me estaban dando mas responsabilidades y mas dinero. Para mi se sintio bonito.”

Opportunities opened up for Blanca and soon thereafter, she decided on the jobs she kept or passed to another domestic worker. She usually accepts jobs that pay well and those that are most convenient to her time schedule. Being the decision maker is unlikely in domestic work, but she realized it was one of the benefits of her hard labor. One of the most significant moments in her life took place recently in Nuevo Laredo. After spending the week working in Laredo, she was invited to a family birthday party in Nuevo Laredo. Even though she would visit her family almost every week, this birthday party was special because she hadn't seen many of her relatives that live further into Mexico. She remembers a conversation she had with several cousins and an aunt that related to her job and even though they understood what she did for a living, she never expected to hear them say they are proud of what she has accomplished. Her family was impressed with the autonomy she has at work. Blanca confessed she has keys to most of her employers' homes and knows the security codes as well. The employers are aware of the day and time she works and if they are not at home, Blanca has permission to enter the house and perform her job duties. Much of the employee-employer tension stems from the employer micromanaging the employee (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Romero, 2002). Most of my participants agreed they prefer to work alone but rarely get to do so since many employers want to see the work as it is being performed. This is not unusual in previous domestic work research (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Romero, 2002).

At the same time, many domestic workers explained that some employers hide their jewelry or lock their possessions due to a lack of trust. In Blanca's experience however, her family sees her as an ideal worker who has agency in work duties and job sites and because she has a strong work ethic, employers trust her.

Yo me senti muy orgullosa de mi trabajo. Mis primas hasta me estaban pidiendo una opinion porque una de ellas se quiera venir para aca a buscar trabajo.

Como que ellas dijeron 'wow, mira a nuestra prima—le va muy bien y a mi tambien me puede ir bien.' No hay trabajo en el otro lado pero no se quieren arriesgar en venir porque muchos trabajos no valen la pena.

I am very proud of my work. My cousins have been asking me for my opinion because one of them wants to come to look for a job. My cousins have told me “wow, look at my cousin she is doing well and I can do well also.” There is now work over there but they do not want to risk in coming for jobs that may not be worth it.

Throughout our conversation, Blanca mentioned her family's favorable impression of her accomplishments in the U.S. on multiple occasions. Her family and friends consider her an ideal worker who has found success *en el otro lado*³¹ and is convinced that her decision to move to Laredo was the right one. Similarly, the data revealed that when domestic workers communicate and/or visit their families in Mexico, they are usually received with considerable praise. In many ways, many family members in Mexico believe they have “made it” and are considered successful or ideal workers. An ideal

³¹ This is the conventional phrase used by Laredoans and other border city residents to reference a neighboring country. The direct translation is “the other side.”

worker has been described as a worker who prioritizes work above all else and is also considered to have a focused commitment and fidelity to a career (Blair-Loy, 2003). In this case however, the meaning of the ideal worker shifts in that there is still an unchanging devotion to their occupation, yet the underlined difference is that family and friends in Mexico consider the women to be model workers, workers they can emulate. For my participants, dignity comes from the self as well as from the family.

Like Blanca, Magdalena is a domestic worker from Nuevo Laredo who is positively influenced by her family and friends to do better and work harder. Magdalena and I met at the main transit center in downtown Laredo. We struck a conversation while waiting for different buses. I noticed she had a small girl with her and later on she told me it was her niece. She had no other option than to take her to work twice a week since her sister had to work and no one else could care for the girl. Her employer didn't mind as long as it was temporary. She explained that being a daily border crosser forces her to think differently about her job. According to Magdalena, if she's willing to travel by foot and bus for at least 90 minutes each way, then she should provide good quality work. Magdalena explains that *haciendo la limpieza*³² is a service she is proud to provide. She admits that at times she works too hard and confesses she has worked about 30 days without one day off. Her hard work is out of necessity but there is more to it than that. Magdalena has a strong work ethic and acknowledges that the driving force behind it is that sense of accomplishment after a long day of work. "*Cumplo con mi trabajo porque me gusta hacerlo, la limpieza, pero tambien porque no hay nada mejor como la casa*

³² Spanish for doing housework

limpia, aunque no sea tuya!” Magdalena enjoys her job and gains a sense of accomplishment whenever a home is clean. She stays positive about her daily commute and the ill treatment she occasionally receives from her employers but cannot focus on the negative aspect of the job. As we sat next to one another, she laughed and confessed that if she dwelled on the negative aspect of the job, she would not have lasted so long. Magdalena has been a domestic worker for over 10 years and admits domestic work isn’t for everyone but keeping a positive attitude and enjoying the job is crucial.

Carmen, originally from Veracruz, Mexico, has been a domestic worker since she was 21. She is now 44 years old. She initially moved to Mexico City to work for a family and care the couple’s two little girls. She was also in charge of all of the cleaning and cooking for the family of four. After the couple purchased an import/export company, they asked Carmen to move to Laredo with them and they would help her immigrate. She agreed and has been living in Laredo ever since. She uses the word *orgullo*³³ to describe how she feels about her work. She visits Veracruz at least once a year and her parents are proud of her success. This type of work is what Veracruzanos call *limpieza de casa*. It is difficult to do. Nevertheless, she is content in knowing her parents and extended family are proud. After working for over two decades in Laredo, the method in choosing her jobs has also changed because oftentimes she has more work than she can handle. Because she has plenty of recommendations, Carmen has autonomy and chooses the best *patronas*. This is uncommon in this type of work, but for Carmen, it is important to consider the following: You must be honest, punctual, and be proud of

³³ Spanish for pride

the work that is accomplished in order to be considered successful and a good worker in this line of work.

Carmen and Alma, a 66 year old domestic worker, find meaning in the work they accomplish. Alma, originally from Nuevo Laredo, told me that work is *necesario*³⁴ and gives her *un porque*³⁵ and interestingly, she finds that domestic work gives her a sense of purpose because she is helping people and treats them with respect. She talked about a time her father told her that when she enters people's homes to work, she must always remember not to touch anything that isn't hers. "*Siempre siempre nos decia eso.*" She follows that strong work ethic today, and though she agrees that the work is difficult and at times overwhelming she likes the work and finds herself in a tranquil state as she completes her job tasks. Alma is proud of the letters of recommendation she has acquired throughout the years since all of her employers have been satisfied with her work. She calls these letters *comentarios*³⁶ and even though they are in English, she knows these are positive letters since no employer has ever complained about her work. Alma also told me of a previous time she was a live-in domestic worker and did not leave the employer's home for one month, yet she did not complain and was satisfied with that experience. She was satisfied with the \$100 she received daily for that job and was also proud of her strong work ethic.

Like Alma, Estela finds dignity in her work, and when she has a bad day, her family serves as a constant reminder of her success. Estela is from Nuevo Laredo and

³⁴ Spanish for necessary

³⁵ Spanish for purpose

³⁶ Spanish for commentaries

works as a transnational worker six days a week. Because she cannot work legally in Laredo, she commutes to and from work everyday. She considers domestic work difficult and even though she is proud of her work and what she has accomplished, she would not want her sisters to do follow in her footsteps. *“Esta muy pesado y por eso le digo a mis hermanas que trabajen. Ellas no lo entienden porque yo estado aqui por mucho tiempo y como yo le ayudo a mi mamá, ellas namas ven el dinero y ven que me va bien. Pero este trabajo es muy pesado. Mucho muy pesado.”* Because her sisters consider Estela to have “made it,” she is fearful they will leave school and work in the same line of work. She considers this a drawback because even though her family regards her as the model worker and a success story, she worries about the message it sends to her younger sisters. In this case, being an ideal worker in the eyes of the family encourages Estela to push through the difficult work and simultaneously strengthens her self-worth and deepens the meaning of her occupation. Nevertheless, the concern of her sisters following in the same footsteps troubles Estela since she understands the complexities of the job.

Mi mama es la que siempre me dice que esta orgullosa y cuando vienen mis tias or mi madrina, ella no para de decir, ‘ay es que Estela le esta llendo muy bien, es que Estela le aumentaron el sueldo de una patrona, ay es que Estela es muy guapa’ y si osea, le hecho mas ganas y estoy feliz pero no se vale porque luego ellas quieren hacerlo. No se, alomejor todavia estan muy chiquitas.

My mother always tells me she is proud and when my aunts or godmother visit, she never stops saying, ‘oh it’s because Estela job is going very well, Estela

received a pay increase from her patrona, Estela does good work,’ and yes I do give it my all and I’m happy, but it’s not fair because then they want to do this too. I don’t know but maybe they are too young.

Estela negotiates her occupational identity of a good worker where she experiences respect and is considered exemplary, yet is cautious of her family members falling into the same line of work. The family is proud of her success, yet Estela is inclined to draw attention away from domestic work and have them focus on their higher education where they will be privy to better career opportunities. This interesting negotiation between embodying the ideal worker simultaneously results in motivation to continue producing good work and having a sense of accomplishment and yet potentially positioning her family members to a prospective problematic occupation.

Although several domestic workers were cautious of their family and friends entering the field of domestic work, most of my participants found it important to defend and safeguard the occupation as a whole. They acknowledge the negative remarks and unpleasant stares from several employers and the employers’ friends, yet my participants found it important to express their feelings of satisfaction in their work. Cecilia, for example, asserts this point by describing how her employer’s friends display a form of discontent when visiting the home and especially during introductions between friends.

Cecilia: Es que viene gente de visita y te presentan y bueno yo así lo e sentido, y no te dan la mano. O no te saludan. Saludan a todos menos... y no es que te den la mano o abrazo, es simplemente el buenas noches y estamos hablando de gente educada. Y te ignoran, te ignoran completamente. Como que uno no

stuviera alli. Y yo no digo nada porque soy la sirvienta. Poreso la ignoran a uno. Si me entiendes? Yo aqui estoy impuesta a que llegan y me abrazan y me dan mi beso, y “como esta Cecilia” que ay que ay que tal. Pero de repente viene gente y la señora tiene la costumbre de presentarme con todos. Lo dice en ingles y no se como me presenta porque lo dice en ingles. Pero muchos, la mayoria me dan la mano o el beso, y ay, mucho gusto, y las maestras de los niños asi que es asi. Y mucha gente viene asi y si, me ignoran.

Ariadne: Y como se siente eso?

Cecilia: Horrible, horrible (laughing) Como usted, no se como, pero imaginese a todos lo saludan menos a uno. Y dices bueno no saludaron a los otros cinco, bueno okay. Pero cuando eres namas tu? A todo saludan menos a ti? Ay para mi es gente mal educada. No se me hace bueno, no me siento. Yo tengo en mi en mi interior, yo valgo. Que yo no tenga dinero o yo no tuve los estudios que tiene el, bueno. Pero yo valgo, asi como usted me mira asi de sirvienta, yo valgo, y con mi delantar haciendo esto y otro, yo valgo. No vijese, yo no tengo eso que soy la sirvienta... Si a mi no me quieres saludar, pos el se lo pierde y que no me salude.

Cecilia: When guests arrive and they introduce the guests will not even extend their hand or they may not greet at all. They greet everyone except you. Not expecting a handshake or hug, just a simple good evening. They ignore you. They completely ignore you like if you were not even there. I don't say anything because I am the maid. That is why they ignore me. You understand? Here at

home, I am used to a hug and kiss and a “ how are you, Cecilia?” And hello and how are you. But suddenly guests will arrive and the lady usually introduces me to everyone. She says it in English and I don’t know how she introduces me because she says it in English. But a lot, the majority of the time they offer their hand or a kiss, and oh nice to meet you, and the children’s teacher too and hello. And other people do come and ignore me.

Ariadne: And how does that feel?

Cecilia: Horrible, horrible (laughing) that everyone is greeted except for you. It would be fine if everyone is not greeted, but not when it is only you? For me it seems that it’s people with poor education. Inside I know that I have worth. I may not have money or education but I have worth. I may be a maid with an apron on but I have worth. So if you do not greet me it is you that is missing out.

Cecilia recognizes the uncomfortable comments made by her employers’ friends as unpleasant and finds it difficult to understand why educated people would ignore her. However, she declares her worth. Cecilia distinctly and repeatedly states the phrase, “*yo valgo*” in order to underscore she is a women of worth. Past research on dirty work shows that employees construct or manage a positive identity by maintaining strong employee cohesion (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) or through the use of humor (Tracy, Myers & Scott, 2006), but my participants employ a positive sense of self-worth, dignity, and self-confidence by acknowledging the negative experiences and the

occupation's dismissive connotations yet underlining the significance of their value as a worker and a human being.

Building on Cecilia's emphasis to underline the value of the occupation and worker, Luz and Veronica, two undocumented domestic workers, assert their occupation as being of value. At 23 years old, Luz understands the limitations of being an undocumented domestic worker. She uses the city bus as transportation to and from work and admits to seeking other employment, but without documentation, most places refuse to hire her. After living in Sabinas, Nuevo Leon all of her life, she decided to move to Laredo to find a good paying job. Luz stresses the importance of finding value in her occupation because there is nothing better than walking into a clean home. *"Eso se debe de valorar. Yo le pongo mucha atencion a mi trabajo porque ella me paga para que todo este limpio y listo."* Growing up, Luz was taught to care for herself and her home and says she does the same in her employers' homes. *"Yo quisiera tener otras horas porque trabajando en el fin de semana es mucho, pero le doy duro siempre. Me gusta la limpieza y ay algo bonito de trabajar en casa."* She wishes she had better working hours but works hard regardless. Veronica reinforces Luz's point by discussing the value of her occupation.

Me gusta la limpieza, si me gusta eso. Yo siempre fui ama de casa y yo gracias a Dios me gusta limpiar y lo positivo es de que gano honradamente mi dinero y no le pido nada osea de limosna. Me gusta ganarme me dinero. Este, ni mas que nada que si lo estoy dejando a mis hijos. Yo no me gusta andar vendiendo esto y lo otro como cuando me dice mi hijo, "ama, cuando te vez apurada vende la

television” y yo digo no mijo, yo vere o me buscare otra casa, voy a buscar otra casa.

I like doing housework. I have always been a homemaker and I am grateful to God that I like it. I remain positive I earn my money honestly and that I not ask for handouts. I like to earn my money. This is what I am trying to show my kids. I do not like selling things as son my son sometimes recommends. My son sometimes tells me, “Mom if you feel pressured, sell the television”. But I normally respond that I’ll figure it out or start looking for a new house. I’d look for another home.

Veronica understands the job limitations of being an undocumented worker. It has been difficult for Veronica and her five children, but she focuses on the benefits of her occupation and takes pleasure from the fact her money is earned honestly and she receives no handouts or is forced to accept any form of charity.

Reflection

In this chapter, Mexican immigrant women domestic workers working and living on the Texas-Mexico border construct and negotiate their occupational identity by pushing through the social, physical, and emotional taint in order to *salir adelante*. My participants construct their occupational identity in a way that moves beyond the implication that it is solely constituted in the workplace. Domestic workers construct their occupational identity and find meaning in the work they accomplish by recognizing that their familial and financial responsibilities significantly impact the work that is accomplished. Even though occupational constraints attempt to confine their

occupational identity as one that is strained and burdensome, domestic workers construct and reconstruct themselves as workers who discursively position themselves to see beyond the taint and the metaphorical dirt. Domestic workers enact their capacity to maneuver through their organizational lives. Necessity and family duties further the importance of sustaining their job and attempting to maintain a positive perspective. They are not essentialized predetermined beings that are in a stagnant position; rather, they socially construct and reconstruct themselves. The conviction to *salir adelante* is at the forefront of domestic workers' occupational lives. Equally, domestic workers challenge said occupational constraints and negotiate their occupational identity in ways that allows them to push forward and persevere through the taint and strenuous work.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FINAL THOUGHTS

The previous analysis chapters offer significant insight regarding Mexican transnational domestic workers occupational identity construction and negotiation on the Laredo, Texas – Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico border. In this final chapter, I make sense of the findings by placing them in conversation with the organizational communication and domestic work research as well as the literature on difference studies. I also discuss broad theoretical and practical implications and then offer three focused theoretical issues emerging from this study. Finally, I discuss the limitations and areas for future research. I begin by offering my interpretation of the key findings that emerged from my analysis.

Discussion

The goal of this dissertation was twofold. First, this study aimed to examine domestic work—a low paid service industry that has been neglected in the organizational communication literature by answering Barley and Kunda's (2001) call to focus on and study actual work practices rather than abstract representations of work. According to Ciulla (2000) work is an important characteristic of modern life and it is utilized as a site where people draw meaning and self-worth (Cheney, Zorn, Palnap, & Lair, 2008; Lucas, 2011). This study focused on work practices that were indicative of domestic workers' daily lives. Second, this dissertation aimed to understand how Mexican transnational domestic workers constructed their occupational identity on the

Texas-Mexico border. The previous analysis chapters reveal significant information regarding the occupational conditions domestic workers confront and the ways in which they construct and negotiate their occupational identity. The following section discusses these findings in more detail.

Constructing and Negotiating an Occupational Self

My participants' lived experiences captured an interesting understanding of occupational life. Domestic workers construct their occupational selves in ways that connect their familial responsibilities with their overall livelihood. This identity work is accomplished as they "create themselves within the constraints imposed on them" (Kunda, 1992, p. 21). Drawing attention to the material conditions that influence their occupational identity, my participants' occupational concerns move them to deploy an occupational identity that is closely influenced by areas of non-work such as strong familial responsibilities and daily border crossing experiences. This focus on the material conditions, which are external to the work site, influenced the ways that my participants reacted, negotiated, and redefined themselves. Most research on occupational identity has centered on how the organization and profession influence occupational identity (e.g. Ashcraft, 2013; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003) while my research highlights the need to explore how nonorganizational and nonprofessional factors influence the construction of occupational identity. My analysis revealed that Mexican immigrant women domestic workers construct and negotiate their occupational identity in two distinct ways: (1) finding meaning in their occupation and (2) enacting job protection practices in and out of the workplace.

Meaning in Dirty Work. Domestic work is often overlooked. There is a particular invisibility that surrounds domestic work and consequently, it comes to the forefront of people's lives when it fails to get done. The invisibility however, should not cloud the fact that this low paid service industry exists and is "real"—even the stigma that seems to be attached to this form of dirty job. Beyond its negative connotations domestic workers find meaning in their occupation. In particular, domestic workers on the Texas-Mexico border construct two meanings of work that help negotiate their occupational identity: (1) pushing through the dirty work, and (2) dignity in the dirty work.

Occupational Identity, Pushing Through, and Importation. As domestic workers navigate their occupational lives, they face varied occupational hazards uncommon to an average worker, especially in the U.S. However, they push through the work whether it be the extensive hours of work and travel time to and from work, the occupational constraints they face in and out of the work site, the social and emotional taint, and the physical strain this type of job produces. Their ability to push through is connected to domestic workers' ability to embody a work-related identity that produces a sense of meaningfulness in their work which allows them to push through the physical and emotional burdens their occupation produces. Most participants agreed that domestic work is *duro*—a word that embodies the significance of hard, stressful, and demanding work. Women described stories of laborious workdays and stressful situations in and outside of the workplace, yet time and time again, they reframe their occupational position from one of *trabajo duro* to one that attains hope for a better life for their

families and themselves. They find a meaning of work that moves beyond the metaphorical dirt and construct an occupational identity of attainability and success.

Domestic workers living and working on the border construct and negotiate their occupational identity through such identity work, find meaning in the work they accomplish. It seemed important that they expressed their somewhat dire account of the occupational conditions in and outside the workplace, but they are equally concerned and have a sense of urgency to appropriate a positive identity in their job performance. Much of the research on occupational identity maintains that workers construct an occupational identity that focuses on the workplace and not beyond it. Their occupational identity is constructed in and around their workplace which means that their occupational identity is influenced by the work practices performed. However, new research (Ashcraft, 2013; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003) suggests that workers construct their occupational identity in and beyond the workplace. This means that like other recent studies focusing on identity construction, domestic workers on the border construct and negotiate their occupational identity by recognizing the negative job attributions while then acknowledging and focusing on the positive attributes the job produces. This is important because my participants acknowledge these negative job features of the domestic work discourse by drawing attention to the work being *duro*, difficult, or tough and captures the laborious aspect of their occupation. On an individual level, domestic workers create meaning out of their work in order to make a better life (Broadfoot et al., 2008, p. 157). Creating meaning out of their occupation is important to

them because when their job is difficult, unfair, and laborious, they look to the substance and tangible value it provides.

Creating a meaning of work that is indicative to their laborious occupation adds to the ongoing conversation of the relationship between work and life. For more than two decades, scholars have sought to understand the ongoing interest in work-life (or what falls within non-work) balance in relation to the demands of work and the quality of life (Clark, 2000; Cohen, Duberley, & Musson, 2009; Guest, 2005; Hochschild, 1997; Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Nippert-Eng, 1995). At least six outlooks of work-life balance are employed to describe the relationship between work and life: segmentation, spillover, compensation, instrumental, conflict model, and border theory. Each model or theory centers on how people navigate in or between the work and life domains. However, Cohen, Duberley, and Musson's (2009) study focuses on the lived experiences of home-work dynamics and argues that people do not inhabit "ideal types" of segmenting and integrating as ways to maintain order at work and/or at home. Interestingly, they argue that people utilize this notion of importing, which is described as "purposeful and drawing on roles, identities, and activities of one sphere to achieve projects in another" (p. 235). This is important because importing brings in particular "material artifacts as well as ideas, feelings, and identities from home into work and from work into home to achieve particular things" (p. 235). This dynamic interplay of work and life is seen as a management strategy for these two domains. Likewise, my participants negotiated an occupational identity that was infiltrated or in this case, imported, to the family life domain. There are no clear work-life balance boundaries per

se; consequently, domestic workers construct a meaning of work that draws from their non-work life, whether it be familial responsibilities and/or border crossing efforts. As Lucas (2011) argues, workers have a “strong desire to construct positive identities related to their participation in work activities and/or membership in work-related organizations” (p. 354). The meaning of their work enables domestic workers to persevere and in that effort, they are negotiating their occupational identity as one of determination and commitment.

Through this form of identity work, domestic workers’ occupational identities seem to be initially constrained by the physical and social taint and devalue what they have grown accustomed to, yet they push through and begin to modify that initial construction. Even though Ashforth and Kreiner (2014) argue that morally tainted occupations (e.g. prostitution, gun store owners and workers, and paparazzi) seem to “constitute a graver identity threat to its practitioners” because moral dirty work isn’t as necessary in society as are physical and social tainted occupations, they are still perceived as stigmatized, thus facing a substantial identity threat (p. 100). As a result, my participants construct meaning out of their work and negotiate their occupational identity as one that has purpose and to a certain point, is empowering or what Alvesson and Willmott (2002) call “opportunities for microemancipation” (p. 638). These are perceived as emancipatory acts or movements that generate or at least open the conversation of individual empowerment (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1996; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Meisenbach, 2008). Examples of such emancipatory acts are domestic workers adjusting and negotiating a pay increase through indirect strategies, voicing

their concerns in implicit and opportune ways, and setting their own work schedules and practices (e.g. times, days, and receiving keys to the work sites). The meaning of their occupation resonates, and as they encounter said occupational constraints, domestic workers recognize their own ability to push ahead while accomplishing the day's work on a daily basis. For domestic workers, work in this sense, is accomplished through particular occupational and communicative practices that are marked and surrounded by the importance of familial and financial responsibilities. Occupational conditions attempt to constrain or confine their identity as being burdensome, yet they discursively reconstruct and negotiate a positive occupational identity as one of conviction and possibility. Rather than a regulatory identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), their positive identity work allows them to socially construct and reconstruct themselves in order to face the struggles their occupation produces. There is an interplay of occupational and personal discourses where there is a significant shift from a regulatory identity to an emancipatory identity. Finding meaning in their work allows them to reconfigure their occupational self to one that embodies promise and possibility.

Occupational Identity, Dignity, and Material Conditions. The second meaning of work that emerged from the data is one that was directed towards self-worth and pride. Domestic workers construct a positive identity by finding dignity in their occupation. Dignity refers to an “inherent worth and value and/or being deserving of respect” and from an organizational and worksite perspective, it refers to the “recognition of the inherent worth and value of organizational actors” (Lucas, 2011, p. 355). Dignity is connected to ways in which workers conceptualize meaningful work.

For example, even though many domestic workers would not choose this occupation, they have pride in the manner in which the job is practiced and performed. Domestic workers construct meaning in their occupation through a sense of dignity in the dirty work that is accomplished. Constructing dignity in an occupation that has been marked as shit or dirty work is difficult, and as Lucas (2011) argues, it is important to draw attention to the “negotiations and experiences of (in)dignity at work” (Lucas, 2011, p. 354). In this case, even though domestic workers experience particular indignities in the workplace, they negotiate a meaning of work that underlines workplace dignity.

In particular, my participants drew meaning and constructed a positive occupational identity in different ways. First, domestic workers believe in the quality of their work. It is not simply a job but an opportunity to present good quality work. However, it is important to consider that dignity can be difficult to attain for marginalized organizational members (difference in identity categories like sex, gender, race, class, immigration status, and occupational position) than those who are privileged organizational members (Allen, 2000). These intersecting identity categories further complicate my participants’ capacity to mediate the social and physical taint—the metaphorical dirt that has been historically attached to domestic work, yet behind that suggested stigma emerges the importance of honest paid labor or as it is commonly known in Mexico, *ganar la vida honradamente*. Domestic workers’ capacity to construct and reconstruct themselves as workers who perform quality work and hold the highest regard to their values and beliefs about work resonates with their words to *salir adelante*

and *darle duro al trabajo*. Dignity, in this case, indicates the significance and value domestic workers place on the execution of their job duties.

Second, material conditions can also challenge domestic workers' experiences of dignity in the work they perform. Materiality or occupational constraints like critical weather conditions, long travel distances from the home to the worksite, heated exchanges at the border crossing area, and low wages can challenge domestic workers' occupational identity. However, domestic workers manage to reconstruct themselves as they engage in identity work and reconfigure the experience of workplace dignity. Their occupational position is interesting because as they encounter these constraints, they counter a disparaged and undervalued narrative with a reflexive outlook and reconstruct themselves as proud and worthy. Rather than remain in a stagnant defeatist position my participants "do" identity work and challenge their presumed stigmatized social location to one that recognizes participants as agents working within the structures in place. For example, one of my participants acknowledged that her own mother's outlook on domestic work is "the worst" occupation. While Lourdes recognized the implications of her mother's words, she negotiated her social location and constructed an occupational identity that underlines work as honest, difficult, and even gratifying. In this case, she recognizes the constraints and works within the structures to construct a self that values difficult and laborious work.

Furthermore, domestic workers find dignity in the dirty work as they experience indignities and ill treatment in their interactions with the patronas as well as other family members. Respect resonated with my participants. However, as in Lucas' (2011) study

within a blue-collar mining community, respectful interactions signify more than ways of being polite or kind; rather, “indignity is characterized by a deeper disrespect stemming from acting upon and emphasizing intergroup status differences” (Lucas, 2011, p. 366). Even though this study did not compare the intergroup and outergroup status differences, a worthy conversation of intergroup differences between domestic workers and *patronas* is meaningful (Lucas, 2011, p. 366). *Patronas* emphasized immigration status differences (documented and legal resident vs. undocumented and transnational) and social class differences within their interactions with domestic workers. Regardless, domestic workers found dignity in spite of the indignities and sought respectful interactions as a way to construct a positive occupational identity.

Protecting the Job, Their Livelihood. The analysis also revealed that participants enacted employment protection practices inside and outside of the workplace. My participants were comprised of transnational workers who were daily border crossers but could not legally work, Mexican immigrant workers who lived and worked in Laredo, Texas and were able to legally cross into Mexico if need be, and undocumented workers who also lived and worked in Laredo. Even though transnational domestic workers could legally cross into Laredo, they were apprehensive about what seemed to be an arbitrary crossing process. The legality issue came into question because transnational workers can cross but cannot legally work in the U.S. On some days, they faced minimal to no inquiry, yet on other days they encountered extensive questioning that led them to perform protection practices. Domestic workers who lived and worked in Laredo were also vigilant about their environment since they were

concerned about their immigration status and/or the precarious nature of the job. It became evident that my participants' occupational identity expanded outside of their workplace as they enacted job protection practices in two distinct areas.

First, transnational domestic workers especially sought caution and paid particular attention to their environment since they maintained a certain level of vigilance as they made their way to and from work. With CBP keeping a watchful eye, they too were keenly aware and concerned about the crossing process into Laredo, Texas. This daily routine was at times no standard routine at all. Domestic workers enacted varying job protection practices to mitigate tension at the border crossing area. Job protection practices varied depending on the usefulness or particular need at the time of crossing into the U.S. For example, domestic workers saved old receipts and retail monthly statements, purchased specific food items, practiced their border crossing "story," and were meticulous about the information saved on the cellular phones and the documents collected and placed in their shopping bags and handbags. Their occupational identity was one that was ongoing as they negotiated particular job practices. Domestic workers enacted job protection strategies in an effort to alleviate their multiple concerns. In this case, the impact of domestic workers' occupational identity went beyond their workplace to sites such as border checkpoints where women engaged in daily negotiations that made their work environment feasible.

Their occupational identity is one that could be potentially strained, yet time and again, domestic workers renegotiated and shifted to a job protection discourse. This was interesting because domestic workers enacted this protection discourse in and out of the

traditional workplace. It permeated throughout their occupation and beyond the worksite. Protecting their job meant more than paying particular attention to their job performance, behavior, and demeanor at work. This protection discourse pervaded their daily lives and shaped their lived experiences as being guarded and mindful of the ramifications of detainment, detailed CBP questioning, and magnified suspicion. Their occupational identity was constructed so as to safeguard their occupation—their livelihood. At the same time, domestic workers' occupational identity was negotiated through the daily interactions on and around the Laredo border area, thus employing job protection practices that do not guarantee safety. However, domestic workers communicatively negotiated and attempted to alleviate the constant uncertainty and potential threat of losing their occupation and revoking their authorization privileges.

Furthermore, domestic workers in the Laredo border area were keenly aware of how to navigate the domestic work system. Not only did my participants enact job protection practices, but they also employed strategic discursive practices in order for to create an advantageous position at work. My participants engaged in distinct mindful and planned discursive practices that allowed them to open the lines of communication between their employers, express their opinions as they saw necessary, and strategize for a higher wage.

At times, domestic workers were eager to express their thoughts and opinions on how they were treated yet they were cognizant of protecting their job. For example, my participants encountered issues of pay that had developed over time, yet they opted to discuss any pay issues at a time they deemed appropriate. They paid attention to their

employers' daily mood and demeanor first in order to point out certain issues and concerns. Not only were they strategic about the time they would express their opinions, participants carefully considered the most fitting approach to undertake. Most of the time domestic workers would indirectly express a concern that dealt with better employee-employer relations, pay, and even immigration issues. Rather than explicitly stating their concern, they opted for an indirect approach and according to my participants the strategic discursive practices were in fact, effective. These attempts to indirectly express their point of view were tactical and relevant in two distinct ways.

First, it was important for domestic workers to negotiate pay increases, changing a work schedule, and even voice their concerns over dissimilar opinions about Mexican immigration rights in an effective manner. Rather than solely venting or verbalizing their concerns, it was critical to discuss such matters in ways that would yield the most effective and favorable results. Second, my participants were concerned about communicating their message in the most efficacious approach, yet their underlining concern was to do so in a way that would not interfere with or jeopardize their employment. Employing strategic discursive practices generated a space to express issues and even potential employer-employee problems and negotiating particular strategies equally presented them with tools to safeguard their occupation.

In this case, my participants' engage in identity work as they attempt to reconstruct themselves by strategically protecting their job. Their occupational identity is reconstructed to one of protection and negotiated by discursively discovering alternative means to reach a more preferable occupational position. Moreover, it is through these

strategic discursive practices that my participants employ an occupational identity that is in a state of flux and mediated by the daily occupational conditions domestic workers face.

General Theoretical Implications

My analysis highlights a number of issues that have several broad theoretical and practical implications for organizational communication scholars, scholars studying immigration issues and the border studies, as well as provide further knowledge on how a substantial number of workers construct and experience their occupational position in these U.S. communities. Those implications include: (1) how stigmatized workers negotiate dirty work, (2) recontextualizing occupational identity through an intersectional lens, and (3) reaffirming domestic work.

Stigmatized Workers Negotiating Dirty Work

“Dirty work” has been described as labor involving physical, social, and moral taint (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). According to Hughes (1958) dirty work occupations are challenged in constructing and maintaining a positive identity. Domestic work is connected to the physical and social stigma and carries a particular negative attribute to the job tasks domestic workers perform. Previous studies have focused on how workers whose job tasks associated with such stigma employ agency as they face challenging and/or negative occupational conditions (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Hughes, 1951; Lucas, 2011; Tracy & Scott, 2006; Tracy & Scott, 2007). In this context, stigma is discerned as “an emergent property or product of definitional purposes that through social interaction is regarded as flawed, deviant or

inferior” and these affiliations mean that workers are defined and reduced by these negative attributes (Grandy, 2008, p. 179). This is why it can be challenging to construct a “favourable” or positive occupational identity (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Grandy, 2008, p. 179).

Taint management strategies are used to help workers assert an individual sense of worth or collective identity (Tracy & Scott, 2007, p. 43). Ashforth & Kreiner (1999) focus on three taint management strategies that underline the importance of reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing as workers manage occupational conditions. Such management strategies have been employed in research studies centering on dirty work that positions work involving physical, social and moral taint. Other management strategies focus on how workers either distance, depersonalize, and even blame as attempts to manage or control the occupational stigma (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark & Fugate, 2007; Tracy & Scott, 2007).

However, the use of these pre-existing taint management strategies does not entirely align with the strategies that transnational and Mexican immigrant domestic workers used in this study. Even though there are similarities in the ways in which domestic workers strategically manage dirty work, there is one key difference. Domestic workers negotiate the stigma and reconstruct an occupational identity by engaging and taking into account the negative attributes their job embodies and then shifting to an occupational self that is necessary to deal with the occupational conditions they face daily. Their discourses do not shift away and neither do they distance themselves from the stigma. Rather, they acknowledge it and have a substantial sense of ownership. They

do not wear it like a “badge of honor” as in the reframing taint management strategy discussed by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) and Tracy and Scott (2007). Reframing discourses transform the meaning of the occupation by immersing the work with “positive value and/or by neutralizing the negative value,” whereas my participants neither focused solely on the positive value or neutralized the negative value (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007, p. 157). Rather, my study shows how domestic workers’ occupational discourse centers on the stigma, own it, and begin to negotiate and reconstruct an occupational identity that captures meaning of work by focusing on perseverance, dignity, and protection.

Similarly, domestic workers do not employ a recalibrating or refocusing normalizing strategy as seen in other dirty work studies (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Tracy & Scott, 2006; Tracy & Scott, 2007). Rather than recalibrating “implicit standards used to assess the work” by raising the level of importance (e.g. trivial job tasks become important) or refocusing and drawing attention to the nonstigmatized features of the work practices (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 422), domestic workers again negotiate within the stigmatized discourse of dirty work and acknowledge the physical and social taint. They affirm the materiality and then position themselves as workers pushing ahead the occupational constraints that are produced. This form of negotiation considers the relevance of the stigma, clearly differing from previous normalizing tactics employed by those engaged in stigmatized work.

This is important because domestic workers find it necessary to have a sense of ownership and pride and not distance themselves from the stigmatized work. This

communicates the importance of work to an immigrant population. Whereas dirty work studies have centered on blue-collar occupation like police officers, firefighters, and even exotic workers, (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Tracy & Scott, 2006; Tracy & Scott, 2007) studies have not examined immigrants' lived experiences have not been particularly examined.

Future research on stigmatized workers should continue to focus on particular populations and/or occupations that have been understudied (e.g. low paid service industry workers, immigrant workers, and transnational workers) in order to examine whether their taint management strategies align with a similar sense of ownership and pride in the dirty work as my participants employed. This area of research can provide insight in how stigmatized workers deploy different or additional taint management strategies than those previously studied (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Tracy & Scott, 2006; Tracy & Scott, 2007). Furthermore, examining particular stigmatized workers calls attention to research focusing on nonorganizational factors that may influence the ways in which workers construct and negotiate their occupational identity.

Recontextualizing Occupational Identity Through an Intersectional Lens

Research on the intersections of race, class, and gender have been studied in varying contexts, yet it still remains an underrepresented form of study (Allen, 2004; Cruz, 2015; Holvino, 2010; Mumby, 2011). This dissertation postulates that intersectionality advances our understanding of the construction and negotiation of domestic workers' occupational identity. It also considers an interesting outlook on dirty work by looking at difference. Intersectionality recognizes the significance of rejecting a

single identity category or additive approach to theorizing difference and oppression. It draws attention to the lived experiences without extracting or underlining one identity category over another. In this study, the intersections of race, class, gender, and immigration status are significant identity categories to consider.

This study provides a useful standpoint that draws on intersectionality as a lens through which to theorize on domestic workers' occupational identity. Occupational identity, in this case, is negotiated and shifts to a discourse of ownership, pride, and protection. This is closely connected to a narrative of their occupational position. As Ashcraft (2013) argues, occupational identity should support a collective-associative view where the nature of work aligns and is in relation to the question of "with whom is this work associated?" (p. 15). She further explicates her position by affirming a "glass slipper" metaphor where an "alignment of occupational identity with embodied social identities [as it] yields systematic forms of advantage and disadvantage" (Ashcraft, 2013, p. 15). This way, an emergent work-body alignment is discerned. This work-body relation recognizes what Ashcraft (2013) calls a "discursive struggle" that asks, what is this line of work and who exactly does it (p. 21)?

Domestic workers' occupational position is interesting because there are no "hierarchies of oppression" (Lorde, 1983) meaning that their lived experiences cannot be broken down or reduced by a single identity category of "woman" or "immigrant." Rather, from this standpoint, understanding these intersecting points draws attention to their unique occupational position and recognizes the reality of domestic workers' harsh occupational conditions. However, we must also consider how these intersecting points

relate with the organization of work. The glass slipper metaphor postulates an understanding of how domestic work has been historically perceived as laborious and categorized as women's work. Moreover, domestic work has been perceived as gendered, classed, and seen as an occupation that has been held by immigrant women of color. Ashcraft (2013) argues that we are not capable of theorizing work and diversity separately "because we judge the nature of work by the gender and race of associated practitioners" (p. 6). This dissertation aligns itself with the same perspective that domestic work should be judged in a similar light. Previous research on domestic work shows domestic work is gendered, classes, and raced (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Romero 2002), and therefore, we need to pay attention to these intersecting points. More importantly, Ashcraft (2013) asserts that "we know the character of an occupation by the company it keeps" (p. 6). The interdependence of the occupation and with whom it is associated becomes substantial to our understanding of how workers occupational selves' exceed the workplace. This is important because these intersecting points also draw attention to immigration and more importantly, they center on protection, security, and vigilance. Pride and dignity also align with this intersecting perspective where a narrative of providing for one's family is a material concern. The meaning and purpose of work is different and much more salient for domestic workers, especially when Saenz and Douglas (2010) argue that Mexican immigrant women "play a significant role in contributing to the overall economic viability of their families" (p. 100). Occupational identity that attempts to capture the work-body relation draws attention to the realities of immigrant life on the border and beyond. Intersectionality draws attention to the reality

of domestic work and its relation to laborious nature of the job and the materiality attached to it. Theorizing occupational identity from this standpoint allows us to underline how intersecting points actually work in the material world.

Even though organizational communication research has focused on diversity and the need to “see” different groups of workers, this still remains an understudied area of research. Because Ashcraft (2013) argues that there is a fundamental interdependence between work and employee, future research should focus on how intersecting points provide a more comprehensive outlook on the occupation and the workers it keeps (Ashcraft, 2013). Further research on intersectionality should continue to focus on immigration—an identity category that is fused with gender, race, and class, especially in the low paid service industry. This will further our understanding of how such intersecting points influences a worker’s sense making in and out of work.

Mujeres Trabajadoras: Reaffirming Domestic Work

Domestic work has been studied from varying contexts (Falicov, 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Mendoza, 2009; Parreñas, 2001; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 2002; Romero, 2011; Saenz & Douglas, 2010). This dissertation aligns itself with previous studies and seeks to further extend the conversation of how this population is making sense of their environment. Previous studies have centered on the employer-employee relationship, motherhood and domestic work, and on the work life experiences domestic workers encounter (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Hondagneu & Avila, 1997; Romero, 2002; Romero, 2011).

More specifically, several studies have also concentrated on the immigrant experience in relation to distance and the multiple stressors domestic workers face as they are away from their families (Saenz & Douglas, 2010). However, this dissertation aligns with organizational communication research studies that center on employee work practices. More specifically, this study draws attention to the work practices rather than the abstract representations of work. It is in this light that a considerable amount of knowledge of their work-life experiences is discerned. At the same time, this study paid particular attention to domestic workers' occupational conditions in order to capture a broader and an in depth perspective of their lived experiences. Even though most studies on domestic work have focused on employer injustices, familial responsibilities, and hard laborious conditions within the work site (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Romero, 2002; Romero, 2011), this study takes a step closer into domestic workers' actual work practices and allows us to pay particular attention to how this occupation is still considered "dirty" through its descriptions of physical and social stigma. At the same time however, this study revealed that even though domestic workers encounter strenuous occupational conditions, they construct an occupational identity that centers on a new meaning of work connected to pride and dignity. Additionally, this dissertation supports other studies that document and call for an understanding of social and political efforts that influence immigration (Romero, 2002). Transnational and Mexican immigrant domestic workers living on the Texas-Mexico border must also face the trepidations of border life where enacting an occupational identity that centers on protection and vigilance is a material reality.

This dissertation focused on how domestic workers create and construct their occupational identity to a new meaning of work that connects to pride and dignity and is further influenced by the material reality of their occupation. Future research should continue to focus on domestic workers' work practices. This type of research can further conceptualize and underline the complexity of low paid service work in relation to the pre-existing taint management strategies employed in differing stigmatized occupations and the taint management strategies domestic workers' employed in this study.

Specific Theoretical Implications

The analysis also draws attention to a number of issues that have specific theoretical implications for communication and border studies scholars. These three focused theoretical implications include: (1) domestic workers manage the invisibility and hypervisibility paradox, (2) the significance of class and immigration status in the employer-employee relationship, and (3) the material concern that borders do matter.

The Invisibility and Hypervisibility Paradox

Romero (2002) and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) argue that domestic work is invisible since work is accomplished in the privacy of the employers' homes. Essentially, the job tasks of cleaning, cooking, and caring are hidden and go unnoticed until they fail to get done. This low paid service industry has not been treated as "real" employment and as Clair (1996) has maintained, anything that falls outside of the conventional definition of a "real job" is undervalued and discredited (p. 264). This disposition is interesting because domestic workers are also forced to become invisible at their work site. They are told to eat in separate areas from the family, they are at times

overlooked when the employers' family and friends walk into the home, and they are also told to clean when no one is in the home. At the same time however, several domestic workers prefer an element of invisibility in that they are left to complete their job tasks as they see fit. Additionally, several participants discussed the implications of such invisibility and suggested that if they were left alone in the home it was a positive sign of trust.

On the one hand, the invisibility of domestic work underlines how this type of work is undervalued and reinforces the uncertainty of what "real" employment constitutes. On the other hand however, invisibility at work can carry influence and importance, yet this is a layered paradox because domestic work is also hypervisible. Domestic workers are readily marked as they cross the border and trek their work commute by foot and the city bus. This is happening in front of us. They are unprotected and exposed while negotiating entry into the U.S. and as they travel between their home and work. My participants claim dignity and pride, yet they want to be invisible to escape detailed inquiry from CBP. Domestic workers maneuver these spaces with pride and dignity in the quality of work they accomplish and the financial stability the job provides while maintaining a constant sense of awareness and precaution.

Reexamining the Employer-Employee Relationship

This dissertation examined the experiences of domestic workers on the Texas-Mexico border. Most of the existing domestic work literature draws attention to the employer-employee relationship, but in particular past research has focused on employers who are white (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Romero, 2002; Romero, 2011).

This study explores the unique relationship between employers and employees who identify as Mexican, Latino, Mexican-American, or Mexican immigrant. Employers hire domestic workers with similar ethnicity, yet distinct axes of difference are worthy of attention. This study underlines the significance of class and the complexity that materializes in that relationship. Even though employers and employees have a similar ethnicity and speak the same language, they have material differences. My participants were mostly employed by wealthy Mexican immigrant women who shared a disdain for “illegal” workers living and/or working on the U.S. border. These exchanges complicated the employer-employee relationship, especially when domestic workers resisted their positionality. Domestic workers understood that speaking against an employer would have a negative effect, yet they resisted implicitly and cautiously. Domestic workers enacted resistant practices that acknowledged their objection and criticism to their employers’ stance on immigration, illegal border crossing, and immigrant work access. This study opened a new area of research that underlines the significance of paying attention to the intersecting points of difference.

Borders Matter

This study underscored the importance of the border. Previous domestic work literature has drawn attention to transnational workers who leave their homes and travel long distances to find employment (Parreñas, 2001). My study points to the fact that daily border crossers must still navigate two different spaces. Even though my participants are daily border crossers who travel a short distance between home and work, they are worlds apart from their neighboring communities. The border constitutes

a different type of transnational worker that must navigate between two different countries on a daily basis. This form of border crossing experience is different and reveals a material effect where workers are hypervisible and must negotiate multiple occupational conditions while facing employer exploitation on a daily basis.

Practical Implications

The analysis also calls attention to a particular number of issues that indicate two broad practical implications for organizational communication scholars, qualitative, and border studies scholars. In the following paragraphs I discuss these issues in detail including: (1) a study on praxis, and (2) a focus on the border.

A Study of Praxis—Workers are *Doing* Identity

This dissertation studied the work practices of transnational and Mexican immigrant women domestic workers. It valued the study of praxis where women are actually doing identity work. This means that particular attention is placed on how domestic workers negotiate issues surrounding the self in and outside the workplace.

Even though it is challenging to do qualitative work with this particular demographic, it is quite necessary. This population has an understandable hesitation to participate and engage in formal interviews; however, it is important to pay attention to their voices. This is the richest method of understanding the lived experiences and a deep understanding of occupational life. By underscoring workers' stories, we are also challenging and partially fragmenting the conventional perspective of the organization by marking the importance of actual work practices (Miller, 2012). Similarly, it is critical to consider the experiences of domestic workers. They are not essentialized

workers with identical concerns and experiences. Rather, domestic workers' experiences are varied and encounter occupational life in different ways. By listening to their stories, we draw attention to the inequity and exploitation but also to the dignified and enthusiastic narratives.

Drawing from intersectionality, we understand that as domestic workers do identity, they do not draw out, remove, or experience work and life through a single identity category. Rather, this study reveals that transnational and Mexican immigrant domestic workers align with an intersectional approach as they encounter multiple occupational conditions. Here, my participants are doing identity as they socially construct themselves and align with an occupational identity that provides for moments of resistance. This study demonstrates that transnational and Mexican immigrant women domestic workers are negotiating intersecting identity categories of ethnicity, class, gender, and immigration status. By studying the actual work practices and considering the materiality of their occupation, domestic workers are reconstructing the meaning of their occupation from one that is marred by stigma and taint to one that aligns with pride, dignity, protection, and vigilance.

As previously argued, rather than only focusing on research that studies the abstract representations of work, further research should continue to center on the working "body" that draws attention to actual work practices (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Cheney & Ashcraft 2007). This type of research furthers our understanding of how workers in varying occupations (nonprofessional and professional) negotiate through their work and life. This form of research brings us a step closer into understanding how

workers are *doing* identity. Additional research in studying work practices furthers our understanding of how people draw meaning from their occupation and can provide a more comprehensive account of how workers dealing with multiple occupational conditions can influence how they negotiate work and life.

Considering the Borderlands

In part, this dissertation is a call to recognize the value of studying the border and more specifically to bodies of work that center on border crossing. This is an underrepresented area of study in multiple disciplines. Considering the border facilitates further knowledge of how immigrant and transnational workers are positioning themselves in the U.S. Additionally, it challenges our understanding of how immigrants and transnational workers contribute to and experience multiple societies and cultures.

Additional research centering on the border facilitates a more comprehensive perspective of workers' occupational conditions that fall outside the conventional work commute most people can relate to. Further research on the border advances our understanding of immigration by drawing attention to the work practices transnational workers and immigrants perform on a daily basis. This generates awareness and furthers our interest in how immigration policy is connected to economic and political concerns in this country as well as those who border the U.S. This type of research draws attention to policy makers at the local, state, and national level that convey an interest in how immigrant and transnational workers contribute to the U.S. workforce. Similarly, research that centers on the border raises awareness on the need to continue an

international dialogue on the facilitation and process in providing work permits to certain transnational workers.

Limitations

This research study is not without its limitations. There are significant challenges with doing research on domestic work (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Mendoza, 2009). The first substantial challenge is difficulty in access (Mendoza, 2009; Romero, 2002).

Domestic workers are apprehensive in trusting or even communicating with strangers.

This is why it is crucial to have an informant in order to circumvent the issue of trust.

Even though it is important to build your own rapport with each participant, there are times I relied on my informant for those initial points of contact and communication.

Those preliminary conversations were crucial but what was even more important was for the informant to substantiate that I was a person the domestic worker could trust.

Because we were dealing with immigration status issues, many domestic workers would not speak or at times even look my way. When I lost my informant, it was difficult for any domestic worker to trust me. At the same time however, losing my informant meant

I had to do even more extensive fieldwork, which allowed me to spend more time

walking along, waiting for, or riding along domestic workers. However, as Mendoza

(2009) argues, having an informant is necessary in different aspects of the data

collection process. The issue of trust is a reality that makes me more aware of entering

the field with multiple plans of action. It was an experience that needed to occur in order

to attempt to capture domestic workers' lived experiences; nonetheless, this required

much more time and energy than I originally foresaw.

The second issue is also tied to access. Domestic workers on the Laredo-Nuevo Laredo border usually walk to and from work or utilize the city bus system. Unless I had prior contact with a domestic worker through my informant or through a snowball sample, it was difficult to discuss or even have a detailed conversation. In order to have several or even one conversation, I had to walk or ride along for 10-20 minutes at a time. Time is crucial for domestic workers, and if they agreed to a conversation, it was to be in increments of 10-15 minutes and while they attempted to get to and from work. There were also times my participants withdrew from a talking point because they noticed other men and women were close by. The issue of access from these different standpoints must be discussed because it seems that in general, research on dirty work has its notable challenges and complexities. In her research, Mendoza (2009) traveled into Mexico and that additional time was spent discussing the border crossing experience as well as discussions of family and work. I was unable to travel into Mexico for most of my fieldwork since there was plenty of local talk of the ongoing violence in Nuevo Laredo. I managed to travel to the bridge and into the bus station, but it limited my understanding of their experiences. Ultimately, this form of data collection is complex and my fieldwork notes could have been even more detailed. However, because I was out in the field during the day, it was difficult to return home and write extensively on the particular experience, especially during those hot summer days. However, research on dirty work should not cease because of its challenges. This form of research is important and draws attention to the actual work practices workers engage with on a daily basis.

A third issue was the difficulty of connecting with my participants for follow up questions or further discussion. I was able to do this several times, but more often than not, I spoke to my participants once or twice and never spoke again. Most of my participants refused to save my phone number and I was at times skeptical of calling them on their cellular phones since a majority of transnational domestic workers were concerned with border interrogation.

Finally, it is also important to express that the experiences of the domestic workers in this research study do not necessarily demonstrate the experiences of all domestic workers. Future research should focus on the complexity of the employee-employer relationship in relation to ethnicity, class and nationality. Several participants discussed moments of employer of abuse, especially from employers who identify as Mexican immigrants living in Laredo, Texas. Future research that examines this complex relationship is necessary to further our understanding of how domestic workers negotiate issues of abuse with employers that self identify as Mexican immigrants who have “made it” and question their employees’ work practices and border crossing decisions.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine domestic work—a low paid service industry that has been neglected in the organizational communication literature. At the same time, it answered Barley and Kunda’s (2001) call to study actual work practices rather than abstract representations of work. Second, this study aimed to understand how Mexican transnational domestic workers negotiate their occupational identity on the Texas-

Mexico border. My participants' occupational identity was negotiated by recognizing a sense of ownership and pride in the work they accomplish. They do not detach or distance themselves from the stigmatized work. Rather, they are mindful of their seemingly strained occupational identity and enact new meanings of work that align with their lived experiences of pride, dignity, protection, and vigilance. Even though the challenges and strategies are difficult to navigate and accomplish, their purpose does not waver. Domestic workers are mindful of a promising future and more importantly they have a tenacious responsibility to their families.

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APPENDIX

TABLE OF PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Name	Age	Worker Status
Maria H.	62	Lives and works in Laredo
Veronica	37	Lives and works in Laredo
Amalia	62	Lives and works in Laredo
Carmen	44	Lives and works in Laredo
Lupita	59	Transnational worker/Lives in Laredo periodically
Cecilia	51	Lives and works in Laredo
Blanca C.	36	Lives and works in Laredo
Viri	-	Transnational worker
Isabel	-	Transnational worker
Maria	-	Transnational worker
Lorena	-	Transnational worker
Irma	-	Transnational worker
Maribel	-	Transnational worker
Patricia	-	Transnational worker
Norma	22	Transnational worker
Sonia	-	Transnational worker
Mari	-	Transnational worker
Araceli	19	Lives and works in Laredo
Socorro	-	Lives and works in Laredo
Lourdes	29	Lives and works in Laredo
Blanca	-	Lives and works in Laredo
Magdalena	30s	Transnational worker
Alma	66	Transnational worker
Estela	-	Transnational worker
Luz	23	Lives and works in Laredo
Guadalupe	-	Transnational worker
Minerva	-	Transnational worker
Dulce	30s	Transnational worker
Marisol	52	Transnational worker